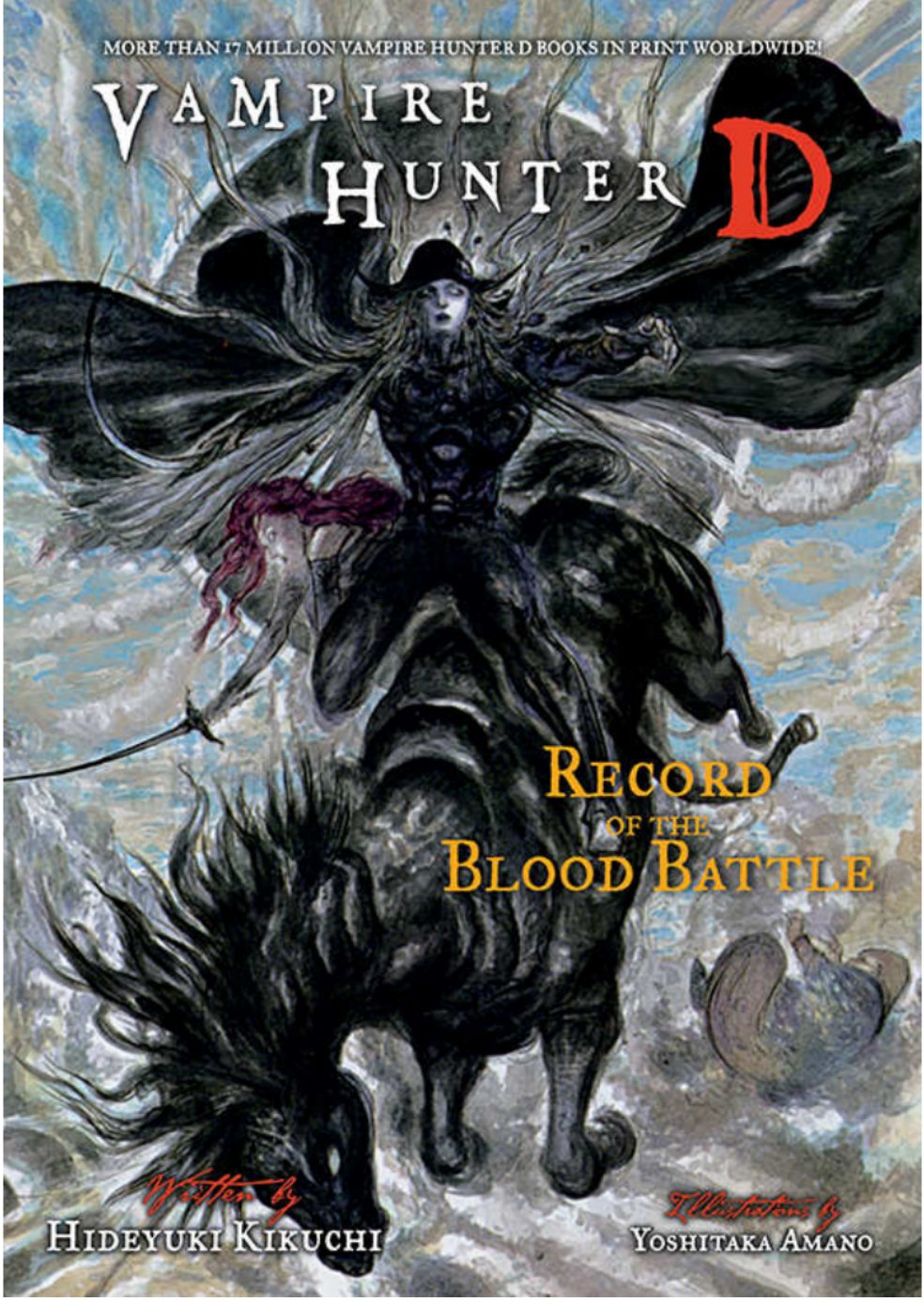
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VAMPIRE HUNTER D
RECORD OF THE BLOOD BATTLE
Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI
Illustrations by
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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 21

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Record of the Blood Battle

HEY, BROTHER!

chapter 1

I

Their swords were drawn. Glittering flecks rose into the air, collecting there, waiting for the fateful moment of blood spray. There were five combatants against one. As for their opponent, the blade he should've drawn to counter them remained sheathed in a scabbard shaped like a crescent moon.

Look around. The location was an outlying area of the village of Satori in Sector Nine of the northern Frontier—the ruins of Castle Macula. There was a crowd ten or twenty deep composed of villagers from Satori, as well as the residents of the three neighboring villages of Elk, Tabi, and Fouran, folks who seemed from their style of dress to be instructors, travelers, bar girls, hookers and gigolos, performing troupe members, gamblers, outlaws, and peddlers of everything from booze and tobacco to medicines, swords and spears, synthetic meat, and motorized equipment, ad infinitum.

Just because this was a Frontier village, that didn't mean they spent all day, every day, shooting and stabbing each other. So when something did happen, everyone in the village locked up their homes and shops and came running. However, there were so many vendors and tradespeople here, it almost seemed as if they'd come days ago and pitched camp. The proof lay behind the rows of onlookers, where roasted-mushroom vendors more suited to late autumn and dried-fish sellers had set up shops side by side, followed by the always popular kebob shops, peddlers of Frontier sweets, and a shop selling rainbow-colored beans, their gaudily illustrated tents lining both sides of the broad thoroughfare. It was just like a carnival boardwalk. In fact, among the crowd were children with eyes aglitter as they gnawed on candy sticks, while their fathers sipped syrupy narcotic drinks from paper cups. Though the smaller stalls had only started to set up two days earlier, people had been coming into the village of Satori for the past three days, and the cause of all this commotion traced back to a day earlier than that.

"Draw!" one of the men urged. He was a hulking fellow; his arms, legs, torso, and head all looked like they'd been assembled from enormous meatballs. Everything about him was round and plump, while his head and limbs were devoid of even a single hair. His adversary stood there as still as a shadow that'd taken form on a winter's day, so he was practically begging when he continued, "C'mon, when I tell you to draw, draw already! If you don't, we can't have much of a sword

fight."

The man seemed truly in a bind, and his opponent finally responded, saying, "Come at me." His right hand went for his scabbard, and then with a flash of prismatic light, his blade was drawn. More than the beauty of its glint, it was the subtle forcefulness with which the young man raised his arm that shook everyone.

"Son of a bitch!" snarled another of his opponents—a muscular giant of a man who was exactly how you'd expect a warrior to look. He sounded both disgusted and enraged. He had beady little eyes, a broad, flat nose, and terrible buckteeth. "You damn show-off. I'll see to it you get yours!"

His boots made a determined step forward.

"Wait! Let me handle this," said another young man, standing to the right of the first. He was the smallest of the bunch, and his weapon was a bit strange. From the back of his left hand, iron claws projected a foot and a half—he wore what the ninja had called a *tekko-kagi*, or "hand claw." The average sword could cut down about four people before its blade was so coated with blood and fat that it was rendered useless. But with its row of four iron claws, the *tekko-kagi* could use its tips like a raptor's talons to rip a foe open without the fat dulling the effect.

"No, I'll do it," the fat one said.

"No, me. I can't stand pretty boys. You wouldn't believe how many times they've screwed me over," said the bucktoothed warrior, and he evidently meant it.

"Shut up. You geezers keep out of this!" the young man with the *tekko-kagi* shouted with so much force his body quaked, and then he kicked off the ground. An incredible jump sent him in excess of fifteen feet, and he swung his weapon down from where he'd raised it overhead. There was an unearthly, mellifluous sound, and then the young man flew back. It almost seemed miraculous, the way he followed exactly the same trajectory and landed back where he'd started the leap.

Cries of astonishment rose from the onlookers, while the warriors looked at each other.

"All of you can come at the same time," the young man said. His voice had become hoarse.

Though his expression twisted with puzzlement for a second, the bald, fat man charged forward, saying, "I'm next!" From the way the bucktoothed warrior muttered, "The bastard's done it again," it seemed the fat man made a habit of stealing others' places in line.

His charge, which made the very ground tremble, seemed little more than the mad rush of a fool.

"Is he an idiot?" the hoarse voice spat, and then the young man in black's blade pierced the fat man's thigh. The thrust felt odd. Though the blade sank into his foe, it didn't feel like it was piercing muscle and fat. It was like jabbing a stick into a wad of rubber cement.

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

The fat man collided with him. From his face all the way down to his knee, the young man in black sank into the doughy flesh. At this point, it wasn’t the spectators who gasped in astonishment, but rather the other four warriors. No one had ever withstood the fat man’s charge. Merely planting one foot back a little, this young man hadn’t even been knocked off balance. However, if he were to remain like that, he was as sure to die of suffocation as an old-timer with a rice cake caught in his throat.

The fat man wrapped his pudgy arms around the young man’s back. At the same time, his face turned toward the sky. The young man’s left hand had pushed his chin up—and no sooner did the people see that than the massive white form was thrown backward with incredible force. Until he struck the ground within spitting distance of the crowd—having been knocked a good twenty-five feet—the other warriors forgot about launching their next attack.

“All right, now it’s my turn!” the bucktoothed man said, flourishing his sword once. His amazement at the young man’s strength had changed to delight. It thrilled him to the core to fight such a man.

“Just a moment,” someone called out. It was the last of the group—the fifth and final warrior. Framed by a head of red hair that seemed ablaze, her beautifully pale countenance also burned with determination as she gazed at the young man.

Everyone present had to wonder why a woman with looks that would have allowed her to lead a charmed life would choose to do this instead. In fact, they’d been pondering that ever since they first laid eyes on her. But now they realized something. She directed an unwavering stream of murderous intent at that inhumanly gorgeous young man. And on neatly drawing her sword, she struck a daunting pose. The woman seemed the most formidable adversary of the bunch.

“Well, I’ll be,” the hoarse voice rasped appreciatively. “What a surprise! This little lady’s tough!”

Extending her sword, the woman slowly raised it to shoulder height. Her left hand was outstretched, fingers curling. No sooner did the people notice that the woman’s blade was strangely straight and thin than it flashed out. The woman made a thrust; in fact, she made a dozen simultaneously. All of the silvery flashes appeared to pierce the young man who stood some ten feet away.

However, it was the woman who gasped with surprise. There wasn’t a mark on the young man, and she hadn’t felt the tip of her sword sinking into flesh. The gorgeous young man in black had moved with an alacrity that surpassed the lovely woman’s speed with the sword. What she’d pierced had been an afterimage he left behind. Her willow-thin eyebrows rose in anger. The murderous intent that billowed from her became an inferno. At that moment, the people realized the woman’s

destiny. There was only one way this could play out.

The woman advanced.

But a tall figure stepped out in front of her. Their one-eyed leader.

“Out of my way, Mikado,” the woman told her colleague in a tone of pure spite.

“Call it a day. You can’t take him.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You know exactly what I mean. I won’t have any of my people throwing their lives away.”

“I’ll never know unless I try.”

“Delilah,” the man said, his good eye reflecting the beautiful woman. Her blazing animosity suddenly vanished. “Watch real closely.”

And with that, there was a rasp of steel as the man they called Mikado drew the sword from the scabbard on his hip.

“Mikado?” the young man with the hand claw fairly gasped.

And the fat man, finally back on his feet, could only nod absentmindedly. “Mikado drew his blade,” he said, his voice shrill.

The world fell silent.

Mikado’s blade was low enough to touch the ground, while the young man squared off against him with his sword shoulder high and leveled at his opponent.

“Well, look at that,” a hoarse voice was heard to say.

Mikado had begun to shift his sword to a high position. At the same time, his face became as starkly white as paraffin.

Something was going to happen. Something outrageous. Sensing that, everyone waited with bated breath. The young man didn’t move. It was still as a holy winter’s night.

Without warning, Mikado lowered his blade. The color instantly returned to his complexion. Streaks of sweat rolled down his cheeks as if by popular consensus.

“I’m not ready to die yet,” Mikado creaked, squeezing a voice from his throat that was equally hoarse. It was like the sound of someone spitting up blood—or breathing their last. Turning to his compatriots, who were rooted to the ground in a daze, he said, “That’s about the size of it. He’s more than we can handle. We’re done here.”

A relieved murmur went through the crowd of spectators.

Mikado turned to face the young man once more. His opponent had already sheathed his blade and turned his back to the man. “Hold up,” he said.

The man in black halted.

“Why didn’t you cut us down? You don’t seem the sort to let somebody walk away after drawing on you.”

The young man began to walk away. Over one broad shoulder, a voice asked, “Why did you come at me one at a time?”

There was no way to describe the expression that wafted across the

faces of Mikado and his people.

"Would you at least give us your name?" Mikado asked. "I'm Mikado, and the girl's Delilah. The fatty's Tong, the runt's Enba, and the first guy you dealt with is Galil."

They had their answer soon enough.

"D."

The color drained from the faces of all five. "You're—" one of them started to say. Or perhaps it was all of them. After that, the warriors said no more, merely watching the young man walk off. Though the wind gusted past him, the murderous intent it should've borne had already died out.

II

D didn't stop until he reached the black ten-foot sphere that loomed near the center of the clearing. The lustrous sheen of its surface as it reflected the sunlight told him it was metallic. The stone walls and rounded columns scattered around it, as well as the remnants of a well, made it plain that the whole clearing was the remains of something belonging to the Nobility—the ruins of Castle Macula. Six days earlier, a powerful quake had struck the region, causing extensive damage. The ground had subsided and there'd been a rash of landslides, but the torrential rains five days ago were the final blow. The mountainside crumbled, muddy torrents coursed over it, and the clearing that at first had been little more than a cramped depression grew to over ten times its former size. And it was four days ago that a piece of history that'd been kept hidden by those thousands of tons of earth and stone was discovered—the black sphere before the Hunter. That was how it all started.

Twenty-four hours was all it took for word to spread from one member of the town hall's damage-assessment team to the entire village of Satori, and then to travelers and merchants. A remnant from the Nobility. And in superb condition. Bolstered in part by the object's somehow humorous form, those who worked up enough courage to go over and touch it or bang on it were unharmed, and that only spurred on the commotion. Villagers had swung mattocks and pickaxes at it, and the blacksmith had pitted first an acetylene torch and then a laser cutter against it, but nothing had even scratched the sphere. It could be struck by a hundred-thousand-degree beam one second, yet be cool to the touch a second later, glistening in the sunlight.

It took no time at all for the people's thoughts to go from *What's it made of?* to *What's it for?*—before winding up at *Is there something inside?* And those musings were transformed into a feverish morass of hopes and expectations when a physics instructor from a nearby school had come two days ago, spending half the day filling the

walls and floor of his hotel room with scribbled calculations that ultimately spilled out onto the dirt of the clearing, until the fateful moment when he asserted, “There’s something in this sphere!”

Something? Could it be jewels and precious metals belonging to the Nobility, or the key to their ageless and undying nature? Drooling, with bloodshot eyes, the people set about trying to break the sphere open. Some shot at it with guns, while others planted dynamite around it. However, no matter what they tried, they couldn’t make this perfect sphere move even a fraction of an inch, despite its shape making it seem like it might roll away at any second. Time merely mocked them with its passing.

There was a reason for their feverish desire. Castles and ruins from the Nobility could easily be found anywhere on the Frontier. The northern Frontier was particularly thick with them, and the artifacts discovered there were purchased either by the government in the Capital or by local dilettantes for considerable sums of money, making communities and individuals quite rich. When signet rings, swords, clothing, sculptures, portraits, and the like could change hands for hundreds of millions of dalas, the villagers were forced to defend their interests. Ruins within the village bounds would be tightly guarded while surveys were conducted under watchful eyes. However, many of the sites turned out to be nothing more than ruins, and the people soon awoke from their fever to find mere fragments of an ancient dream littering the weedy wasteland.

The matter was simple enough. All the village of Satori had to do was keep possession of the site for four days. But a problem cropped up. The clearing in question was near the boundary between Satori and a neighboring village, in an area that by common agreement neither had laid claim to for the past five centuries. Their neighbors were vehement in their opposition. As the protests grew more violent, Satori decided to ignore its neighbors, who then hired a band of warriors to enforce their claim. At essentially the same time, D came into the employ of the village of Satori. Both sides had drawn their weapons to settle the matter of who owned the strange metallic sphere.

As D stood before it, a couple of men rushed over to him, forcing their way through the heavy crowd. They were public officials from Satori. One wore a tin badge on his chest—the sheriff.

“Nicely done! Our faith in you was justified,” said a skinny man with a mustache, rubbing his hands together. He was the mayor. “The sphere is ours now. We ought to throw a museum up around it and spread the word far and wide. Hey, don’t touch it!”

D was resting the palm of his left hand against the gleaming black surface.

“You’re out of luck,” a hoarse voice sneered.

The person in charge of public relations wore an expression at once

angered, startled, and perplexed, for though the voice had most definitely come from D, it seemed inconceivable that it was really his. "Was that you? What do you mean by that?" He intended to drill the Hunter with his questions, but they had no force behind them.

Taking his left hand away from the sphere, D said, "There's someone inside."

The mayor and those around him froze. No doubt they felt as if the whole world had just iced over.

"You're not kidding, I warrant," said the sheriff, the first to return to his senses. With a massive frame and manly features, he was someone who could be trusted. He apparently possessed quite a bit of mettle, too.

"I have an interesting little story for you," a hoarse voice said. "Once upon a time, there was a dog who was white all the way down to his tail. Ha, ha, ha—gyaaaah!"

Squeezing his left hand into a fist, D said, "It seems that as soon as the rocky hillside protecting it gave way, the resuscitation system was triggered. The occupant should be coming out before long."

Low and cold, his voice called to mind exquisite steel. The group found itself spellbound by it before they could grasp the meaning of what he'd said.

Immediately returning to his senses, the mayor squawked, "When you say *before long*
, how soon do you mean?" D's tone of voice was such that it had them believing the unbelievable just like that.

D said the damnedest thing: "A minute from now."

The pronouncement was like a bolt out of the blue. Though everyone knew what he was talking about, their inability to fathom it left them looking first at one another, then staring stupidly at D, and finally focusing their gaze on the black object before them. They were speechless. Through a silence so absolute it seemed they might even be able to hear the sunlight raining down on them, the group waited.

"Ten seconds more," someone murmured. There was no need to say the rest.

Five seconds . . .

The people saw four streaks run from the top of the sphere all the way down to its bottom. If what D said was correct, would it be a Noble inside? If it were, they wondered if the dazzling sunlight wouldn't reduce him to dust the instant he appeared. Or would it be the stuff of legend—a wind gusting from the darkness of history, pregnant with evil, as a Greater Noble that could walk in the light of the sun returned to life?

The object was oblivious to all their speculation.

Zero.

There was a terrific whistle as white vapor shot from the top of the object. Steam. D alone remained, with the throng retreating, preceded

by their own screams. To them, the sphere looked like a flower bud made of steel.

Slowly its four metallic petals opened, and from the still-billowing steam inside, a figure in black became visible. Brilliant sunlight rained down on the figure, but he didn't cry out or writhe in pain. Instead, through the thinning white veil, the figure could be clearly seen stretching both

arms as he said, “Ah, yes!”

“Is that a N-N-Noble?” the mayor stammered.

“Yes,” said D. It wouldn’t do to leave his employer’s question unanswered.

“Then . . . Then what we have here is a Noble who can walk in the light of the sun . . . and terrorize us by day, too?”

“That it is, I suppose.”

The mayor stared at D in shock. The last remark had been in the same hoarse voice he’d heard earlier. “Grab him,” the mayor said, his tone nearly a whisper. “Grab him for us. He’ll make a great tourist attraction.”

The metallic petals continued to move, opening to a full ninety degrees, while amidst the collection of unknown machinery within, a figure rose from what appeared to be a couch of sorts and stood, shrouded in black fur.

“Baron Macula?” D inquired.

A murmur went through the crowd. Did this gorgeous Hunter know the name of this Noble from untold antiquity? On further consideration, the ruins were called Castle Macula, making it possible to imagine the name of the lord of the manor. However, the people were so mesmerized by the gorgeous young man and his actions that they couldn’t even conceive of it. At the same time, another suspicion formed in the crowd’s mind: Could it be this Hunter had known these strange events would take place today and he’d encounter a Noble? But that suspicion vanished like mist thanks to the question D had posed and the answer that came next through the faint haze.

“That’s right,” a grave voice had replied.

“I’m D, a Hunter. You need to come with me.”

“I don’t want to.”

“*What?*” the mayor and sheriff both exclaimed. Unlike the fearsome Noble’s first reply, the second had been casual and flippant.

“This should be good,” a hoarse voice from the vicinity of D’s left hand murmured with amusement. “Looks like we’ve been thrown a curve.”

“Give us some wind,” D said in a low voice.

No one would’ve believed the sudden gale had gusted from the left hand of the inhumanly beautiful Hunter. Blowing away the faint steam, it left the Noble born from those petals exposed in the light of day.

The murmur that shook the air was like the deep rumbling of a quake.

III

The Noble was standing in his sphere a foot and a half off the ground. From there, he ceremoniously lowered his left foot toward the ground—

but just as the tip of his boot was about to make contact, it halted. He didn't pause because he'd remembered something. He was simply physically incapable of reaching the ground. Taking hold of the edge of one metallic petal, the man fidgeted a bit, then gave up.

"I'm getting down," he declared haughtily. Then, in a lower voice, he added spitefully, "Are you going to give me a hand or not, you dolts?"

To the people, the scene called to mind a bear cub slipping and sliding its way down a tree trunk while a gigantic predator waited below. The Noble they'd so feared was stocky, less than five feet tall, and from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, he was covered with black, bristly fur. However, what brought gasps from the onlookers and made terror bubble up from the depths of their souls was the demonic bronze mask he wore on his face. Though they could tell at a glance that it wasn't his real face, these people of the Frontier also felt it wasn't *just* a mask.

"Give me some help," he bellowed gruffly. "I can't get down."

It wasn't so much an order from the mayor as a shove from behind that sent two men, presumably from the town hall, forward, with trepidation. However, just ahead of them the man-bear seemed to have a change of heart. Stretching out a plump arm, he said, "Do you think a Noble would place himself in the hands of some hideous humans? Hey, you over there—come here."

On seeing who he was addressing, the whole group gasped; it was the handsome young man in black. The Noble's sentiment was understandable. But wasn't the young man a Hunter?

It may have been on account of this fact that the man-bear toned down the arrogance in his voice when he said, "What are you doing? Are you going to help me or not?"

D stepped forward. For a third time the crowd gasped. Before their murmurs had faded, D made his way through the people, took the man-bear by the arm, and roughly tossed him to the ground, chilling them all with terror.

Flipping over once, the man-bear hit the ground back first. "Ouf!" he groaned pitifully.

A Noble's pain turned to rage, which would be visited on mankind—from the age of legends right down to the present day this horrifying truth had been etched into human DNA with bloody chisels and mallets of cold terror. But the man-bear lay sprawled in a mess on the ground, just groaning for a while before slowly picking himself up like a centenarian.

"You son of a bitch. You're going to wish you hadn't done that!" he cursed.

However, the way he massaged and patted the small of his back was enough to cause someone to remark, "He's like a little old man or something, isn't he?"

It seemed either their terror and expectations had been too great, or there was something fundamentally wrong here. Suspicions began to creep into the minds of the spectators, but they were still dealing with a Noble. The tension might've vanished from their faces, but the people surrounding him made no attempt to press any closer.

"Upsy-daisy!" the man-bear cried out like an old hillbilly as he stretched his back out. Looking up at the heavens, he lifted his stubby arms as if cheering *hurrah!* "Ah, what marvelous weather! And my first peek at the sun in five millennia. It hasn't changed a bit," he remarked with pleasure. After a pause of about two seconds, he glared long and hard at the crowd around him, asking, "Who the hell are you people?"

Though they couldn't see any eye openings in the bronze mask, the people backed away noisily.

"What are you gawking at? I'm not on display!"

The mayor looked at D. He wanted the Hunter to begin a dialogue with the Noble. However, the handsome man in black just stood there, silent as a statue. Abandoning that notion, the mayor cleared his throat. The silence was so deep, that one cough echoed through the area like the roar of a greater dragon.

Perhaps the daunting position he was in impressed itself on the mayor once again, because he rested a rough hand against his chest, got his breathing under control, and desperately choked back his fear before saying, "I'm the mayor of the nearby village of Satori. Who in blazes are you?"

His voice trembled horribly, yet two thoughts occupied his brain at the same time. First, a Noble who walked in daylight was an exceptional fiend unlike any ever described. Second, a Noble who walked in daylight couldn't exist. Based on the Noble's words and actions up till now, he had to be lying. If that were true, the mayor decided that things would not go well for this man. Or such was his intent, but it didn't go as he'd planned.

The mask turned to him, asking, "What the hell do *you* want, sodbuster?"

A great wind suddenly gusted by. The mayor tensed.

"So, you say you're the mayor of these parts, you little prick? Have you forgotten my name, then? *Have* you? Have you forgotten the name of Baron Macula, Greater Noble and ruler of northern Frontier territories where so many rustic, pissant Nobles swaggered about?"

"No, I know that," the mayor said proudly. His face was as drained of life as that of a wax figure. "But I'd heard that the baron died more than five thousand years ago. The very thought of him showing up again in this day . . ."

"You great, thick-skulled dunce. Whoever said I was dead? Who saw it? I'm right here. I never set foot outside my dominion. I've remained here in hiding for a certain lofty purpose. But it would seem I may have

been a bit too leisurely."

"What do you mean . . . a l-lofty purpose?"

The man-bear spat in disgust, "The brain of a Greater Noble is like the universe. Can the lowly maggots that crawl across the ground fathom the infinite vastness of the cosmos? Away from me!" He made a flourish of his arm, and the crowd backed away.

"But, um . . . You . . . Well, you're walking around in daylight . . . You c-couldn't be a Noble!" the mayor stammered in reply.

In return, he got a sneer—no, a mocking laugh. "Bwahahaha! Do you still have such stubborn notions stuck in your heads? So, am I to believe that through the five millennia I've slumbered nothing has changed, that you still fear the night, and when the sun goes down you shut the village gate and bolt your doors, quaking at the slightest howl of a monster through sleepless nights? Half your short lives are night. That you would sacrifice all that to pointless, antiquated notions—well, you really are a hopeless lot. Bwahahaha!"

"But . . . that's the way it is . . . for all Nobles," the mayor insisted, though he seemed to be speaking deliriously.

However, his words had an unexpected effect. The laughter of the man-bear, Baron Macula, stopped dead. His bronze mouth muttered a hushed, "*What?*" Then, "You say the Nobility don't walk in the light of day? Impossible. This is no laughing matter. You mean to tell me even now Nobles live solely by the darkness of night? I can't believe it!"

The voice that issued from the mask churned with deep-seated surprise and turmoil. But before the mayor could capitalize on the Noble's melancholy, he was struck speechless.

"Nobles are still creatures of the night," a steely voice said, causing all to turn and look. "Even now, the radiant light doesn't belong to your kind. I need you to come with me."

At that instant, the chubby figure leapt from the spot beside D to one ten yards distant, like a rubber ball with a good bounce.

"My guess is you have some of our blood in you. Are you one of those dhampir deals? And such a killing lust—you plan on destroying me, don't you?"

D stepped forward without a word.

"Hey, now!" the pudgy figure exclaimed, making another jump that put him in front of the crowd. Screaming, the people pushed backward. And another leap—this one toward an area behind the crowd.

The wind howled. Catching the baron's body in midair, it sent him back the other way, despite his alarmed protests. D's left hand was raised. No one there recognized the tiny mouth that appeared on his palm for what it actually was.

As the terrific gale stopped cold, the baron was unceremoniously plopped down at D's feet.

"That hurts," the Noble said, rubbing his back.

True to form, D asked, “You don’t have any other tricks?” He sounded quite surprised.

“Don’t screw with me, or—oww!” the baron cried, glaring up at D from the ground. “I may be a Noble, but I’m a pacifist. In this place, I led the peaceful life of a scholar. I had no use for all that fighting and parrying and fleeing nonsense.”

“Then what was all that jumping and bouncing around?” asked D.

“Just some abilities pertinent to my hobby.”

“Your hobby?”

“Yes—martial arts, actually.”

Although the man-bear hardly appeared suited to hand-to-hand combat, D didn’t comment on that, saying only, “Next time you do that, I’ll cut you down.”

Fright seemed to coalesce in the baron’s features, and he fell silent. He wasn’t alone; the faces in the crowd surrounding them also went ghostly pale. They all believed D was serious.

“Sheesh. Do whatever you like,” the baron finally said in a rotten little voice, after some hesitation.

A streak of light zipped out. That glint was all the people saw. By the time they’d blinked their eyes, the bronze mask had fallen at the baron’s feet. It was split in two. However, no one had seen it break.

A murmur that defied description ran through the crowd. It was one of amazement at D’s skill, then acceptance, but the people’s expressions were those of disbelief.

The face beneath the mask was almost exactly what the people had imagined. It was a pudgy egg of a face with heavy eyebrows that looked like smears of charcoal, narrow eyes agleam with craftiness, a short, fat dumpling of a nose, and thick lips that looked like they might disgorge vomit at any moment. Yet it may have been his triple chin that leant an undeniable charm to his features.

Here and there, various comments were uttered. Glaring at those responsible, the baron asked in an intimidating manner, “You got a problem with me?”

D turned to the mayor. The old man appeared quite satisfied, with rosy color swiftly flooding his face. “We’ll hold onto the device he came out of,” the mayor said. “A pod that actually concealed a Noble—tourists will be coming to see it for the next century. Don’t touch any of the controls inside! The thing’s dangerous.”

Then turning back to D, he continued, “A Noble is more than even our sheriff can handle. If you’d be so good as to escort him back to the town hall. You’ll be paid there.”

The mayor grinned like a man enraptured. It was fairly unsettling to behold.

TO HIS PLACE OF JUDGMENT

chapter 2

I

Led by a pair of officials from the town hall, D and Baron Macula, the mayor, and the sheriff proceeded in that order to the edge of the village, at which point the mayor quickly stepped up and said dourly, “That’ll be far enough. Well done, D.” Taking a bag from the saddlebags across the back of his cyborg horse, he tossed it to the Hunter. “I’ve already counted it out, but if you find it light, just say the word,” he added in a haughty tone.

“No longer needed, eh?”

D’s hoarse voice caused both the mayor and the sheriff to shoot suspicious looks at the black-gloved hand gripping the reins. The Hunter’s left hand.

“That’s about the size of it,” the sheriff said in a solemn tone. He was trying to be coercive. “Your part is done. Leave the rest to us, and be on your way. Our village doesn’t need any half-br—er, anyone with Noble blood in ’em around.”

“You think the lot of you can keep him under control on your own?” the hoarse voice inquired.

Sitting on a cyborg horse commandeered from one of the spectators, Baron Macula peered up into the heavens with great interest. Town officials were packed in close around him.

“You needn’t trouble yourself about that,” the sheriff spat, turning toward the village. Everyone except D followed along after him.

“You can come into town if you like. But we have nothing to do with you anymore. Keep that in mind if you do.”

With that remark from the mayor as their cue, they left the rider in black and his steed behind in the sunlight.

Once the cloud of dust and the thunder of hoofbeats had faded, the hoarse voice inquired, “What’ll you do? I don’t care much for those assholes. Wanna go burn down their village?”

“My horse needs to be fed,” D replied. By that point he’d already started forward.

Once D had reached the stables, a man with a laser cutter in one hand had quickly taken some x-rays, saying, “The knee joints are all shot to hell. What’s more, the energy casing and circulator are worn like nobody’s business. When’s the last time they were swapped out?”

“I changed horses about a month back.”

The man was shocked at D’s reply. “You needed a whole new horse?

Look, you could keep this thing jumping nonstop for a hundred years without it getting this bad. If you were an ordinary customer, I'd tell you to get the hell out of here for treating a horse this way, but for it to get this bad, it can't be your personality that's the problem." As he stared at D, his bearded face started to flush vermilion. "Mister, you're a dhampir, ain't you?"

"That's right."

"I see," said the man, flinging the horse's reins against D's chest. "Sorry, but I can't work on no horse of anybody what got the blood of the Nobility in him. Be on your way, now."

A great noise resounded from the man's chest. Though he was gigantic in size and had to weigh about 225 pounds, he was knocked on his ass, landing at the cyborg horse's feet. Catching sight of the reins that'd struck him out of the corner of his eye, the man grew pale.

"This horse doesn't have any Noble blood in it," D told him softly.

The man nodded at that. His breastbone creaked. The blow he'd taken had been like a straight-arm from a wrestler.

"See to it."

And saying that, D went outside.

A number of riders were just pulling up to the stables.

"Hey!" one of them called down with delight from the back of his steed. It was Mikado. Familiar faces were looking down at the Hunter. "We meet again, D."

Dismounting, the warriors surrounded the gorgeous young man. Oddly enough, D didn't brace for action, and no murderous intent radiated from him.

"Your power was something else," the plump Tong said, slapping the Hunter on one black shoulder. They all smiled at him. "You're the first guy to ever get the better of me with pure strength. So, you got any plans right now?"

"Nope."

"Even after driving us off, they never bought you a round, did they? That mayor's a cold bastard," said Enba.

"Would you join us for a drink?" asked Mikado.

"Yes, that'd be great," Delilah said, clapping her hands.

D didn't move. Not because he didn't understand the reaction of the people he'd defeated earlier, but because he wasn't accustomed to it.

"Forget that guy. Come with us, bro," the beaming Tong said.

"Yeah," Galil agreed, and Mikado nodded. "Let's go have some fun!"

While there were some exceptions, most drinking establishments in Frontier villages were open during the day as well as at night. After all, in the evening their lights only served to inform night-flying monsters that there was prey inside. And those who wanted a drink didn't care what time it was.

Reserving a room in the back, they started drinking. Tong sat to D's right, while Enba was to his left. The eyes of both men held a reverent glow whenever they looked at D. They'd given it their all, and he'd still beaten them.

"Well, drink up."

D coolly drained the glass of wine they poured him.

Eyes wide, Tong said, "You're a wild man, brother. This stuff's the strongest hooch on the Frontier. One mouthful will put most drunks on their ass, but then, we should expect as much from the guy who knocked us silly." Still grinning, he sucked down his own drink, then let out a satisfied sigh.

Enba quickly brought the flame of a cigarette lighter to his compatriot's lips, and a fiery tongue shot out. He'd ignited Tong's breath. A second later, the fat man and his chair fell backward. He'd been bowled over by the very flames he'd expelled.

Enba snickered. "Serves you right for acting like such a big man. Okay, D, you and me are gonna have us a little drinking contest. You might've beaten me in a fight, but drinking's another matter." Grabbing a bottle off the table, he slammed it down in front of D. "We'll never get anywhere sipping our drinks like this is a damned church social. So, try this on for size! I'll go first."

Grabbing his own bottle, he started noisily gulping down the contents. Draining half of it in one swig, he pointed to D's bottle and said, "Ogay, D. Now yit's jour durn!" And with that, he keeled over backward.

"Is that the end of it?" a hoarse voice asked softly, but just then a blazing head of red hair moved in from the Hunter's left side.

"Oh, that's just pathetic! It takes more than that if you wanna have a drinking contest."

Delilah's complexion was already the same color as her hair. Roughly kicking the supine Enba out of the way, she took his seat. "D, take me on, too," she said, setting up two more bottles.

"You folks sure are big on challenges, ain't you?"

"You say something?"

"No," D replied, taking the bottle in hand, bringing it to his lips, and turning it on end in a single artless motion.

Rising to his feet, Galil said, "Hey, watch it! You'll fry your brain that way!"

Mikado had watched in silence up until that point, but even his eyes held a gleam of surprise.

After about five seconds, D returned the empty bottle to the table.

“You’re still fine?” the dazed Delilah asked him.

“As you can see.”

“Jou’re damn right I yam,” Enba slurred, his head popping up over the edge of the table. Grabbing hold of it, he pulled his torso up. His

face was pale, and his eyes crossed.

"Oh, sleep it off!" Delilah snarled.

But he just grinned back at her, saying, "Jou're gonna make a pash at Mr. Hanshum here, ain't jou?"

Jabbing a finger at his face, she shouted, "Shut your mouth, you lousy drunk. What a ridiculous thing to say!"

Though Delilah bared her teeth at him, Enba ignored her entirely, saying, "If jou're gonna make a pash at a guy by getting him to drink, jou'd better have one yourshelf!"

"Shut up!" she shouted, suddenly grabbing the bottle and bringing it down on Enba's head with a thud. Made of high-polymer glass that was hard as stone, it didn't break or even crack, and Enba slumped backward once more.

"Lousy drunk," Delilah grumbled, as a bottle banged down in front of her. "What?" she said, her eyes reflecting the dashing figure in black.

"Fair is fair."

For an instant, an expression of something resembling rage shot across the woman's lovely countenance, but she quickly sighed and accepted her fate. Taking up the bottle, she stared at D. "If I drink the whole thing, I'll probably die. Even if I don't, I could be left a mess for the rest of my life. If that happens—"

"*Will you take care of me for the rest of my days?* That's the cheapest ploy ever," Galil said, his lips twisting into a grimace.

"Hold me for just one night."

The silence of the seabed fell over the room. A heartbeat later, the seas boiled with explosive laughter.

"Delilah, my girl, don't lay your cards out on the table like that!" Tong exclaimed, his body quivering as if from an electric shock.

"You've forced yourself on more guys than we can count," said Galil. He wore a wry grin.

"Shut up, all of you!" Delilah turned and shouted. "Of course I was just joking. Don't be so quick to start trouble, you jackasses!" She snarled at them. Her face was bright red, perhaps due to how much she'd already drunk.

Turning to her, Mikado nodded and said in a reconciliatory manner, "Okay, okay. The rest of us will look after you if it comes to that. So, go be a lady."

"Thank you. Now, watch this."

Holding the bottle, she tilted it back, her throat bobbing as she drained a third, half, two-thirds—and then both she and the bottle fell backward. The color drained from her face with chilling speed, her body bent like a bow, and every one of her joints creaked like a baby bird chirping. With a bizarre groan, she pushed her tongue out between her jaws.

"Oh, no! She's having a reaction. Get her some medicine!"

Mikado got up and shoved both index fingers into Delilah's mouth. He was trying to keep her airway open and prevent her from biting off her tongue at the same time.

In the meantime, Galil pulled an injector loaded with an ampoule from a pouch on his belt.

"Hurry! You're taking too long!" Mikado cried, his voice taut with tension.

"All set!" Galil said, injector in one hand as he made his way over. But right next to him, a figure leapt up from the floor. Galil had no time to get out of the way, his compatriot's head smashed into his hand, and the injector and ampoule were sent flying. Her one chance.

"You goddamned idiot!" he cried, delivering a chop to the man responsible without even thinking, but the other man narrowly avoided the blow by slumping back to the floor. Most likely, his rise from the floor had been a reflex. Either that, or he'd reacted instinctively to the cool and composed tones of their leader. It was Enba.

An inhuman sound issued from Delilah's throat, and her body contorted to its limits.

"Damn!" Mikado shouted.

A black-gloved hand responded to his cry of despair. The men's eyes were trained not so much on D's handsome features as on the left hand he laid against Delilah's pale brow. When his skin came in contact with hers, there was an entirely different sound. Like something was being sucked out.

Galil let out a low gasp of surprise.

Like a film running in reverse, Delilah's movements retraced their former progression—her spasms subsided, her body straightened out, and the color flowed back into her skin.

After a prolonged treatment during which the woman's life hung in the balance, D pulled his hand away as if nothing had transpired—and only two seconds had actually passed. At that point, the men saw something. As D pulled his left hand back, there was a vivid pair of vermilion lips on his palm.

At the same time, Delilah opened her eyes. She felt a hazy sort of vertigo, but it quickly cleared. Delilah sat up. Ignoring the hand Galil extended to her, she looked up at D. He didn't offer to help her up. She got up again on her own.

"I'm afraid I caused quite a scene, didn't I?" she said, but behind her wry grin churned an undisguised delight. "I guess I'll be in your debt as long as I live, D."

She extended her right hand to him, but naturally D ignored it.

"Oh, this is a surprise. I've never had a man refuse to shake my hand before," Delilah said, somewhat perturbed.

"We're surprised at *you*," said Mikado, a look of disbelief on his face. "A warrior being so quick to offer someone their sword hand, of all

things. And this is the first time I've ever seen you looking to shake hands."

"You don't say?" Delilah turned away peevishly, and the flush in her countenance wasn't entirely due to alcohol.

Mikado turned to D. "Thanks to you, we got to see a new side of one of our comrades."

"Hey, don't mention it," a hoarse voice replied.

"Oh, you practice ventriloquism?"

"You might say that."

"Well, that sure is a creepy voice. Sounds like an old crone playing madam at a whorehouse." Tong laughed uproariously.

"Indeed," D said in his own voice.

By his hip, another voice could be faintly heard to say, "What's that supposed to mean?!"

Mikado turned his head. Galil, Delilah, and Tong turned the same way at almost the same time. Surprisingly, even Enba, down on the floor, lifted his besotted head. Their eyes focused on D. However, they weren't looking at him.

"Fifteen riders," Enba said from the floor. It was unclear if he was even fully conscious. Actually, his expression and his posture showed him to be thoroughly relaxed.

"They came in through the northern entrance," said Delilah.

"And they sure know how to ride," Tong said, still cackling.

There was a wall behind D. Beyond the wall was a corridor, and on the other side of that was another room. There was a window in it, and that window faced the street. But as the walls were constructed to keep the din in that boisterous bar from being heard outside, how had they managed to hear people riding by, knowing their numbers and even how well they handled their horses?

"At any rate, they've got nothing to do with us. How about another drink, brother?" Mikado said, raising a glass.

II

As Mikado had said, those riders were no concern of his group. Turning up in the sheriff's office without so much as a knock at the door, one of the riders showed credentials that impressed the mayor and other village officials who happened to be there.

"A patrol from the Capital?"

"That's right," said a man in a gray uniform caked with white dust, giving a grim nod. "I'm Donnelly, the patrol leader."

"But we'd heard you were passing through the village of Dunnich just the day before yesterday. That's more than a hundred and twenty miles east of here," the mayor said, eyeing the other man suspiciously.

Calmly, the man said, "That was the main force. You know about the

bandits who've been active in the Kezus Mountains, don't you? Well, we're a separate force sent out to crush them. Three days ago, we were searching the mountains when we got orders from the Capital to get here as fast as we could." The mayor didn't even have time to get a word in edgewise before Donnelly drove the point of his business at him like a spear. "I'd like you to remand the Noble you've taken into custody. By order of the Capital."

Running his eyes across the papers the man tossed down on the desk confirmed to the mayor that they were, indeed, documents issued by the government in the Capital. They even bore the signature of the present head of the administration. They said that no matter what had been unearthed at the village, it was to be brought back to the Capital.

The mayor protested such unilateral action. "I don't care if it is the government in the Capital—I just can't accept that we're expected to let them take what we excavated for free. You'll have to give me a valid justification for this."

"Are you familiar with Noble Law Article 9, 'Regarding the Excavation of Noble Ruins and Remains,' paragraph 7?" Donnelly asked, a cruel smile rising to his lips. *Of course someone like you wouldn't be*, it said. And he was right.

As the mayor wallowed in humiliation, a low voice poured into his ears. "And I quote: *Fundamentally, Noble ruins and the items excavated from them belong to the individual or community that owns the land. However, in cases where the government in the Capital deems a property of special interest, said individual or community must immediately comply with their requests.* I believe that should suffice."

"No, that's a question of legal interpretation, and our circumstances —" the mayor countered, not ready to concede.

Donnelly interrupted, asking, "What did you intend to do with this Noble, then?"

"Er, actually—"

"In a Frontier village, there's only one thing to do when a living Noble is discovered. What else can be done besides driving a stake through his heart and lopping off his head?"

The mayor and the sheriff both froze. He was right. That pudgy little Nobleman had come along quietly. He'd even gone into a cell. And though they hadn't given it much thought, they had to wonder now if that hadn't been because D had been present. But they'd gotten rid of D. Yet the Noble remained passive. Once he was sure D was no longer around, was the Noble planning to break out and exact a vengeance beyond human ken?

As the villagers turned toward the holding area door in spite of themselves, Donnelly asserted coolly, "On the whole, the northern Frontier regions have a relatively weak fear of the Nobility. In light of that, I imagine your aim was this: You'd make this Noble who can walk

in the light of day a famous attraction to draw in tourists. That'd certainly be profitable. After all, all you have to do is give him blood, and even if you didn't, Nobles are still ageless and undying. He'd still be alive long after this village ceased to exist. However, the upper echelons in the Capital have something broader and deeper in mind than a village out in the sticks. This is a living Noble—and one that can walk in the light of day. Think about what such a creature could mean for the whole human race. Okay, enough talk. We'll be taking that Noble now."

Just as Donnelly took a step forward, a shot rang out to his rear. One of the officials slammed back against the wall behind him, clutching his right shoulder. A single-shot pistol had fallen at the man's feet.

As the sheriff instinctively went for his weapon, a gun barrel as big around as a pepper mill was jammed in his face. An inch and a quarter in diameter, the barrel was packed with spongy tubes. The sheriff slowly brought his hand away from his gun.

"You know what this is?" Donnelly asked him.

Nodding, the sheriff said that he did. Beads of sweat had formed on his cheeks. "It's a microneedle gun, isn't it?"

"That's right."

The instant Donnelly replied, a slot in the holding area door opened and the barrel of an old-fashioned rifle appeared. A roar shook the room.

While one member of the patrol was blown backward, a stark gleam on the surface of the door centered around the end of the gun. The gleam formed a circle a foot in diameter, which then became a gaping, black hole in the eighteen-inch-thick door. The sound of a body hitting the floor reached them through the hole.

"Nobody give them any trouble!" the sheriff cried out.

"The jailer? That was unfortunate," Donnelly said, waving the barrel of his microneedle gun from side to side in a menacing fashion. "That's Sasha, isn't it? How is he?" he asked one of his men. He must've been talking about their colleague who'd been shot.

"He's dead," someone replied.

"I'll have to file a report with the Pension Bureau. You'll all be witnesses."

There was a low grumble of assent.

"The Administrative Bureau will notify you eventually about what actions will be taken. Now, turn that Noble over to us."

The sheriff made a toss of his chin, and a deputy who'd been beside the mayor went over to the iron door with a fresh hole in it, and grabbed the key ring that hung on the wall. Using one of the keys to open the iron door, he went inside. There was presently the sound of another door being unlocked, followed by the creak of hinges, and then the pudgy Baron Macula appeared.

"Who the hell are you guys?" he asked, furrowing his furry brow.

Donnelly explained the situation.

"Hmph! If humans are running the world, it doesn't matter to me much where I go. Well, I suppose it's better than staying in this hick village so tourists can gawk at me. Lead on!"

He peered about the room, his eyes halting on a battered leather satchel resting beside a desk. The same bag he'd brought out of the sleep capsule with him, it was a favorite of his. It hardly seemed to suit a Nobleman, though.

"Fetch me that," he commanded haughtily, and one of Donnelly's men grabbed the satchel. He then turned to the mayor and asked, "Did you take a look inside it?"

The mayor shook his head. "Despite how worn it is, we simply couldn't get it open."

A daunting smile formed on his round face. "You're a lucky bastard. Maybe you've got a guardian angel," he spat, his words chilling the mayor before the grinning Nobleman left the sheriff's office.

A number of Donnelly's men hastened out after him, while one who seemed to be his second in command looked up at the sky and whispered to Donnelly, "We were a little late getting here. By the time we hit the Valley of the Salamander, the sun'll be going down."

"Then we'll just have to camp out. He's an odd little Noble, but he's definitely a real treasure. We've gotta get him to the Capital as fast as we can."

It was nearly noon then, and the air was losing its determined clarity.

III

The party of fourteen riders arrived at the Valley of the Salamander with only an hour to spare before evening paid its call. The westward faces of the rocks were stained rosy pink by the light. The patrolmen halted their steeds at the entrance to the valley, for the figure of a lone horse and rider had appeared in the languid light.

The men exchanged glances. The figure also wore a gray uniform.

He was a middle-aged man astride a cyborg horse. As befit the Frontier, he had an expression as hard and foreboding as stone. The middle-aged man halted his steed just ten feet from the patrol. The silence that hung between the two sides was short.

"Who are you?" Donnelly finally asked.

"A colleague of yours—of all of you, in fact," the man in the uniform said with a smile. There was a deep scar on his left cheek. A bullet wound. Against his tanned face, the white glare of his teeth burned into Donnelly's eyes.

"Posing as an official is a serious offense, but you probably knew that, didn't you?"

Behind Donnelly, the air stirred with slight signs of movement. His men had drawn their guns in unison. Some were single-shot pistols. Others were rivet guns or stake guns. Not counting Donnelly, that made thirteen weapons in all—and that overkill response to just one man showed how rattled the patrol was.

"It's a serious offense, I'll give you that," the man on horseback conceded. "So, what's to be my punishment, then?"

"Death."

"Wait!" an unlikely figure called out to stop them. "This is just crazy. Talk through this." It was Baron Macula, which was rather strange, come to think of it.

From Donnelly's right hand, there was the sound of gas being released. A million tungsten needles launched at Mach 5, or one mile per second. They penetrated the man's chest, pulverizing flesh and bone.

As the man tumbled out of the saddle, Baron Macula leapt up. "Wha—what have you *done*? You didn't even check up on him before you—" At that point, he suddenly froze. A stunned expression on his face, he looked around at the men and said, "You mean to tell me, you're the real impostors?"

"That's right. You just realizing that now? You're not very smart for a Nobleman." Up on his steed, Donnelly twisted around to show him a mocking grin. "Have you heard about the bandit group that's been terrorizing the Frontier recently? Well, that's us! Four days back, a plant we had in Satori came and told us what was going on. We knew there'd be big money to be made, so we waited nearby. Fooling a hick sheriff and mayor was easy enough, but a real patrolman wouldn't have fallen for it. Of course, thanks to that, the mayor and the rest of 'em didn't need to be killed."

"Hmmm. I see," the baron said, taking one of his many chins in a pudgy hand, but he quickly inquired, "So, what do you intend to do with me?"

Slightly unnerved by the way the Nobleman's lips had begun to twist into a grin, Donnelly replied, "Actually, just what I said back in the village. There are more government organizations and rich eccentrics who'd drool over a Noble who can walk in daylight than you could shake a stick at. See, rather than thinking the Nobility are something to be feared, they want to learn the secret of immortality. So, we bring them you, and get enough coin to buy a great big chunk of the Frontier. See, with really rich folks, the sky's the limit."

"You intend to sell me for *money*? That's insulting!" the baron said, turning as red as a boiled octopus. Apparently he was quite upset.

"Shut up! I don't wanna hear any complaints out of you. Play nice, and you'll be treated hospitably, as someone who's going to make me a tidy sum. Make things hard for me, and I'll chop off your arms and legs!"

“Oh—oh yeah? I’d like to see you try!” the baron shot back from atop his steed. From the uncomfortable look on his face, it was clear he was bluffing.

“You still don’t get it, do you, Nobleman?” Donnelly said, turning the microneedle gun toward the baron. “Looks to me like you still haven’t gotten over your glory days. Well, let me show you just what your situation is now. We’ll start with your right arm.”

“Let’s talk this over!”

“Don’t be daft,” he said, his finger on the trigger.

A gunshot rang out, piercing his chest. Blown off his horse, Donnelly fell to the ground. He’d been killed instantly.

“Cogs—what the hell are you *doing*?” one of the men cried, training a revolver on the man who’d been on Donnelly’s right. That man held an identical weapon. He was the one who’d shot and killed Donnelly so suddenly.

The man waved his still-smoking gun around, protesting, “You’ve got it all wrong! It wasn’t me!” As he shouted, he kept firing. Three more riders dropped in rapid succession, and he cried, “This isn’t right!”

The men’s bullets converged on their colleague.

That was when the nightmare began.

“Take that, you bastard!” one of the men sneered, just as the man to his left blasted a bolt through his left temple with pressurized gas.

“My hand—it just did that all on its own!” the second man screamed, while another drove his knife into his belly.

It seemed as if a cloud of bloodthirsty insanity drifted over the men. They shot their compatriots in a wild melee. Horses mercilessly trampled the men who’d fallen.

Finally, only one remained.

“What the hell . . . Everyone just started shooting . . .” he groaned in disbelief as his hand rose to his temple. His bolt gun spat flames before the man even figured out what had caused all this.

The weight of the dead exerted a modest pressure on the earth, and in return the ground thudded dully. A very brief silence visited the twilight.

“Wow,” Baron Macula finally muttered, his pudgy face turning to look straight ahead. Toward the first person who’d been shot—the real patrolman.

“Hey, you got what you wanted. You can get up now.”

After the Noble spoke, the man got up, without any stiffness. He still had a gaping hole in his chest.

“I’ll be damned,” the baron groaned. He seemed impressed. “I can pretty much guess what happened, but it was you who killed these guys, wasn’t it?”

“I suppose it was,” the man replied, knitting his brow as he inspected the damage to his chest, then put his right fist into the hole. Time and

again, he put his arm through all the way up to the elbow. There was something humorous about the act, though on further reflection, it was also chilling.

Watching with an expression of intent fascination, the baron said, “You’re quite an interesting fellow. Say, you wouldn’t happen to be after me, would you?”

“That’s right,” the man replied, nodding as he pulled his arm back out. “We’ll wait here a little bit. The gang should be along soon.”

“You’re a bandit, too?”

“Right you are. I had a plant of my own in the village of Satori. But as coming through this here valley was a little too hairy, they took the long way around. I couldn’t be bothered with that, so I went on ahead alone. I’m the boss, JQ,” the man with the hole in his chest said, grinning at the baron. “I imagine you know the deal with this valley. I bet you planned on letting these assholes go in without saying anything, figuring you’d be the only one to survive.”

“Hmph!” the stunned baron snorted, as the man had apparently been right on the mark.

“You’re kind of a slimy bastard for a Noble. But you’re worth a fortune, no doubt about that. Those folks in the Capital will piss themselves for joy. All right, get down from there.”

Though the baron was still stunned, he suddenly pulled down the bottom of one eye with his index finger and stuck his tongue out at the man.

“What the *hell*?” JQ remarked, and the moment he understandably furrowed his brow at the unconventional response, the baron delivered a spirited kick to his steed’s flanks with his stout little legs.

“I’ll be damned,” JQ shouted to the heavens.

The baron and his steed were like one as they leapt over the man’s head, landed some fifteen feet away, and galloped into the valley without a backward glance.

“Seems I might’ve underestimated him,” JQ muttered just before the thunder of iron-shod hooves faded in the distance. “I was able to make it through once, but I don’t think I’d ever like to set foot in that valley again. Looks like I’ll just have to let him go.” After glowering at the stony world around him, he finally broke into a grin. “Well, he still has a long way to go. At some point, when he’s clear of the valley—”

JQ didn’t finish what he was saying as he whirled around with lightning speed. He hadn’t intended to turn—he’d been compelled to do so by a sense beyond comprehension.

Far down the same road the bandits had traveled, a horse and rider had suddenly taken shape. The ring of iron horseshoes striking rock was growing closer.

“Who goes there?”

There was no answer.

JQ then did something rather odd. “Who goes there?” he asked again, and then he viciously snapped, “Shut up!”

There was a reason he reprimanded himself. He was chilled to the marrow of his bones. Just hearing his voice might’ve been enough to bring the approaching rider down on him. He knew he couldn’t avoid him. And now the horse and rider were about to pass right by.

The man astride the cyborg horse wore a wide-brimmed traveler’s hat, a pendant of a deep blue hue, and a pitch-black coat, and an elegantly curved longsword swayed to and fro on his back.

JQ was left reeling, but it wasn’t from relief that the rider went by without so much as glancing at the bandit corpses that littered the ground. Rather, he’d caught a glimpse of the man’s profile between the brim of his traveler’s hat and the upturned collar of his coat. For all his fear, it left him swooning and intoxicated.

As he watched this second figure disappear into the valley, JQ groaned to himself almost deliriously, “Could you—could you get him to kill himself, do you think?”

“Child’s play,” was the immediate reply.

“Let’s follow him,” JQ said, and he began walking.

“What for?” asked a voice tinged with faint laughter.

“To hire him to catch that Nobleman and transport him. That man could do it. Even through the Valley of the Salamander.”

After a short pause, the other voice said, “No, I wouldn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“With looks like that? He’s just too dangerous! One little misstep, and you and I will both wind up dead. For today, I say we fall back.”

There was another pause, and then JQ said, “I agree. We’ll get him sooner or later.”

“Clever boy.”

As if challenging the voice, JQ glared in its direction, but he immediately thought better of it, silently walking toward his cyborg horse in the blue light of dusk. Still with a fist-sized hole in his chest.

THE MONSTER IN THE VALLEY

chapter 3

I

D chose the Valley of the Salamander because it was the shortest route to a neighboring village. The valley was feared, and with good reason. However, that meant nothing to the young man. The road through the valley was covered with rocks. Every time the hooves of his cyborg horse struck one, it sent tiny sparks flying.

After proceeding for about half an hour, he heard a pitiful voice ahead calling out, “Please, help me! Somebody! Anybody!”

“It’s our little friend, isn’t it?” said a voice from the Hunter’s left hand, which gripped the reins. “What an embarrassing display! Hardly seems worthy of a Noble.”

Even D said, “He’s a strange one.” The Nobleman must’ve made quite an impression.

After the Hunter had advanced another hundred yards, he saw a chubby figure lying in the middle of the wide road. He was clutching his right ankle with both hands. Leisurely, the Hunter rode up beside him, then looked down without saying a word.

“What are you doing? Hurry up and help me!” the Nobleman cried, squealing with pain.

“What happened?” asked D.

“I was just getting down from my horse when I twisted my ankle. It really hurts. Hurry up and help me already.”

“And a Noble blubbers over something like that?” D remarked, his words intended to cut like a knife to the chest, but they didn’t seem to have any effect at all on the baron. He continued to scream a litany of cries: “The pain! It hurts! Help me!” There was no sign of his horse. Perhaps it’d been startled by his cries and run off.

“Leave him be,” the hoarse voice said in disgust. “The sun will be down soon. I bet if that ol’ salamander shows up, his foot will heal fast enough. You could snuff him, but unfortunately no one’s hired you to do it. Hurry along now.”

D voiced no objection. His steed moved forward.

For a moment, the pudgy Nobleman looked puzzled—then he cried, “Oh, so you intend to just leave a wounded person lying here, you bastard? You’re a lousy brute. Ah, where has all the humanity gone in the last five thousand years? Oh, the pain! There’s really no point in living any longer. No, there’s still life in me, but my soul has died. If you’re just going to leave me here, you might as well kill me. Oh, the pain! The pain!”

There was no way his somewhat exaggerated cries of agony would cause D to deviate from his course. The Hunter's steed proceeded another dozen paces or so, but then it came to a dead stop.

The air in the wooded valley froze. An ever increasing blueness surged into the world.

The baron cried out about his pain.

"Here it comes!" the hoarse voice said, fraught with tension.

Far down the road, something was coming. D's right hand slipped into his coat. Searing the air, a rough wooden needle was swallowed by the blueness down the road.

"No effect. It's still coming!" said the hoarse voice.

D's figure shook. It was his steed. The cyborg horse was backing away. Whatever was coming frightened it. How terrifying would the thing have to be?

Leaning over, D slapped his steed's flank. The horse stopped.

"This is something else, all right!" the hoarse voice groaned. "But I think we should fall back. I've come up with a good idea."

"What's that?" asked D.

"Leave him here. We can make our escape while the salamander's eating him."

"That is a good plan," D conceded.

"Please, help me!" Baron Macula cried. "How can you call yourself human? I mean, a dhampir? I'll curse you till the end of your days. Leaving the weak and defenseless while you make your escape—you're the scum of the human race."

Considering that the Nobility had always treated humans like they were insects, calling D the scum of the human race was more absurd than infuriating.

Cruelly enough, D wheeled his horse around.

"You coward—help meeeeeee!"

In the blink of an eye, the pounding of the cyborg horse's hoofbeats against the baron's eardrums faded into nothingness.

"Shit! He's a lost cause. There's just no trusting a looker. He doesn't understand the workings of the world. The next time I see him, I'll make him sorry. Oh, the pain! The pain!"

The Nobleman lay there on his belly, already having spilled a good quart of sweat. He crawled, or rather rolled, toward where his leather satchel had fallen by the side of the road.

"If only I had that . . . Shit . . . A lousy salamander . . . Of all things . . . Huh?"

Raising his pudgy face, the baron turned his bloodshot eyes to the left, toward the far end of the road. Something weird was coming.

"Hey, what's that?" Squinting his eyes, he said, "Is that a horse's ass?"

It was the steed that'd run off and left him behind. Now, it was backing toward him. Just like D's steed, it was terrified of something up ahead. A creature that had taken a wooden needle from D and continued forward undeterred—was this the dragon-like salamander of legend?

From heavens streaming with the colors of darkness, a woman with disheveled hair descended. Along with a yellowed cotton blouse, she wore a long skirt that was like a tattered rag. Even as she descended, her ash-gray hair covered her face, hiding her features. And though the woman landed backward on it, the horse didn't so much as whinny. It was paralyzed with fear.

There on its back, the woman raised her hands. The gray hue of her fingers was no trick of the light, and from them stretched wicked, yellowed claws. Reaching back with her left hand, the woman caught hold of the horse's mane. With a damp, tearing sound, she ripped it off. Not only did she take the mane, but the hide and flesh below it pulled free as well. The woman's right hand flashed into action. Chunks of flesh flew from the horse's back and hindquarters, spraying a bloody mist everywhere. In less than a second the cyborg horse had been entirely stripped of flesh and lay on the ground as a mere skeleton. The whole area was covered with a lake of blood and oil. In the center of it, the woman knelt down, completely ignoring the baron as she took up one of the scattered chunks of meat and began to eat it.

This was the legendary salamander?

Her speed was incredible; eating an entire horse—meat, organs, right down to the bones—took less than a minute. She was a wretched sight that sent reason and even fear itself packing, and as the baron was staring at her, she suddenly twisted her head in his direction. Beneath her ashen hair, eyes aglow with blood light transfixed the baron. The woman raised her hand in front of her chest. Her splayed fingers made clutching motions. Anything they touched, even a genuine fire dragon,

would be torn apart. A beastly howl spilled from her unglimpsed mouth.

The woman pounced.

"Oh shiiiiiiit!" the baron cried, and he tried to scramble away—but he crawled less than four inches.

The monstrous woman was still in midair when a stark flash of light struck her between the eyes. Perhaps she was hit this time because she was focused on her prey, the baron. The woman writhed as she fell at the Nobleman's feet. Contorting and wailing in agony, she was a sight unparalleled in its ugliness and cruelty.

The baron was so riveted by her violent death throes that he hadn't noticed the sound of a horse riding up behind him.

"Killed it."

"Yeah," the baron replied, although the hoarse voice hadn't been directed to him, of course.

The spasms of the woman on the ground began to subside. Noticing he wasn't alone, the baron turned to find the young man in black and his cyborg steed. If the needle of rough wood that'd pierced the monster between the eyes wasn't the baron's, there was only one other person who could've been responsible.

"What'd you come back for?" the Nobleman blustered, still lying on the road. "I was just about to turn that bitch inside out. You've got your nerve, interfering like that."

"You never learn, do you?" the hoarse voice spat. "I think we should put some fear into you."

The baron didn't know what that was supposed to mean, but as he felt a cold hand stroke his back, he turned around in horror against his will. When he'd turned his head partway, his hair was seized and given a ferocious jerk. With no time to flee, he arched backward. His hair pulled right out.

A heartbeat later, a needle whistled through the air, sinking into the base of the fiendish woman's neck as she exerted all her remaining strength. This time, the monster fell and she didn't move again.

"Buddy, you've got more lives than a cat," the hoarse voice remarked with disbelief, adding, "Anything at all that hag latched onto, she'd rip to pieces. But you—"

The voice suddenly broke off, and D's eyes reflected an image that resembled a jellyfish hovering dimly in the night air.

"What are you looking at?" the sprawled-out baron asked indignantly. "Never seen a bald head before?"

D's eyes weren't the only things that held a reflection. The baron's pate held a blurry image of the Hunter's unearthly beauty. He'd been saved from the hag's deadly grip by his hairpiece.

"Good luck," the hoarse voice told him as the cyborg horse began to walk away.

"Wait! Wait just a minute!" the baron cried, still lying on his belly,

arms and legs flailing. “You intend to leave me out here in a dangerous spot like this? Take me with you. Come on! I’m not saying there’s nothing in it for you. Let me give you the good news!”

Still, the Hunter continued to leisurely ride away.

“Hey, wait! I can lay my hands on a fortune. The gold and jewels of the Nobility! You’ll be the richest man in the world.”

The horse halted.

“What else?” asked a voice like the evening itself.

“What *else*?” His manner changed, and he shot D a hawkish glance. “Know about *that*, do you? You’re no ordinary Hunter. Oh, okay, wait! You’re right. I’ve amassed a collection of the Nobility’s inventions. Is that what you’re after?”

“Where?”

“Will you take me with you?”

“Sure.”

“Yes! Success!” the baron said, flailing his limbs once more. Only this time, he threw up two fingers in a sign of V for victory. “Well, first I need you to take care of my leg.”

“Are you really a Noble?”

“With a face like yours, you shouldn’t be using that old-fart voice. It’s a weird hobby you have there. Okay, I’m a Noble who can walk in the light of the sun. To be able to do so, I’ve sacrificed a lot. My regenerative and healing abilities were especially hard hit.”

“You can walk in the light of the sun, but if you twist your ankle, you can’t even stand? Your priorities are all screwed up,” the hoarse voice remarked.

“Shut up. Are you going to fix me up or not?”

Dismounting, D placed his left hand on the baron’s ankle. “Stand up.”

“Hey, not so fast. I’m kind of scared. Easy does it. Easy!”

The Nobleman was so tentative in his actions as he tried to rise that it seemed dawn would arrive before he finished, so D gave him a kick. Squealing, the pudgy, bald figure fell over again.

“Go ahead and get up. You’re already fixed.”

“What?” On moving the limb, the baron found that indeed, his pain had been reduced to a dull throbbing. Getting up, the baron cracked his neck to either side like a hoodlum limbering up for a fight, walked over to the leather satchel and picked it up, then went over to the rock wall that towered to the right of the road.

Focusing his Noble eyesight in the darkness, he said, “It’s around here, but I can’t tell where. There should be a reddish stone set in this wall. Look for it.”

“Why don’t you find it yourself?” the hoarse voice asked.

“Hmph! Because I can’t see.”

“What?”

“Like I said, I sacrificed a lot.”

“You’re worthless.”

Saying nothing, D walked over to the same rock wall the baron had just backed away from. After checking the entire area, he stared at the baron.

“Nothing? That can’t be. I’m certain it’s here—aha!” he exclaimed, turning his fat face to the sky.

The hoarse voice needled him, saying, “Now, you’re not gonna tell us it’s the rockface on the opposite side of the road, are you?”

The baron twisted his lips, and then looked at D and smiled as if trying to curry his favor. His finger was pointed at the opposite rockface. “Right you are,” he said bashfully.

II

The red stone was quickly located. It had a skull mark about the size of a little fingertip carved into it.

“Are you seven years old?” the hoarse voice said with scorn.

The baron didn’t seem to mind at all as he skipped over, then turned to look at D while chuckling knowingly. When D failed to react, the Nobleman pressed the ring he wore on his right pinkie finger against the skull mark, a sour look on his face. A second later a heavy fog billowed at the two of them. Through it resounded the haughty laughter of the baron.

“Muwahaha! Surprised?”

D held his left hand out in front of himself. “Well?” he asked it.

“It’s an amazing setup. The rockface has split open for a good hundred yards. The fog’s billowing out of it—oh, what have we here?”

“What is it?”

“This is odd. That bastard’s just milling around. Ha, ha! He let all that fog out, but now he can’t see the entrance, either. Oh, he just smacked into the rockface. Ah, he’s reeling like a drunk!”

The Hunter said nothing.

It was a few seconds later that D’s hand latched onto the baron’s collar as the Nobleman woozily staggered about clutching a lump on his forehead.

“What are you doing?”

“Show me what you promised.”

“Oh, okay. Damn it.”

“You planned on running off while we were lost in the fog, didn’t you?”

“Whatever are you talking about? Do I, Baron Macula, look like that manner of scoundrel?”

“Do you think you look like anything else?”

“Goddamned Hunter. Just follow right behind me, already!”

"Can you lead the way?"

"You insensitive lout. Of course *you* have to go first. But be careful. There's no telling what kind of traps there'll be! What in the—"

The baron had risen into the air without warning. Clinging to the Nobleman's collar with his left hand and holding him out in front of him, D stepped in where the rockface had split open.

"Well, you sure are an odd little Noble."

Rather than grow irate at the hoarse voice's remark, the baron wore a puzzled expression as he reached behind him, felt D's fist, then tilted his head to one side. "You're one to talk about odd, making a voice come out of such a strange place. And your tastes are bizarre, using such a crude voice."

"Shut up! I don't have to take that from someone so stupid they set it up so even they couldn't see in here."

"Hmph! That was an accident."

"An accident?"

"This impermeable fog was meant to foil anyone else who might find my warehouse, but when I went to sleep, that was the one device I forgot to switch off, apparently."

The hoarse voice was at a loss for words.

"To wit, it's been manufacturing fog nonstop for five millennia. It won't disperse so easily, I suspect."

Indeed, D could normally see through the densest fog as if it were midday, but he'd stated at the entrance that he couldn't see through this. Yet from the way he steadily progressed without any instructions from his left hand, he must've known what the hand could see.

Advancing through the fog, D turned corners, went up and down slopes, and finally halted. The fog there was a fainter hue, allowing the things around them to come into view like a scene through a snowstorm. A different hue tinged the two figures—for the vast chamber was filled with dazzling gold and jewels, as well as mountains of weird devices.

"See? This is my hidden warehouse," Baron Macula declared, puffing his chest even as he hung in midair. "The inventions you want are off to the left, way in the back. Now, set me down already. I'm going to find some valuables."

Tossing the protesting baron to the floor, D walked off toward the inventions.

On returning several minutes later, D was greeted by a moving mound of gold and gemstones. Wearing armor that gleamed more exquisitely than solid gold, the baron had also adorned himself with bejeweled necklaces and other ornaments. D quietly gazed down at him.

"You plan on walking around like that? You won't get ten paces before you'll be threatened by a thousand stakes," he said in a voice of steel.

"You—you think it's a bad idea, do you?"

"Do what you like once we get out of the valley. Let's go."

D started walking back the way they'd come. Behind him, the baron followed with a cacophony of metallic clattering. The leather satchel alone he clutched close. Though the fog remained thick, they'd been this way before.

D exited into the valley without stopping once. A few minutes later, the resplendent Nobleman appeared, huffing for breath, and as he slumped to the ground he said, "Why are you in such an all-fired hurry?"

"This valley will be wiped out in thirty minutes."

"What? Why?"

"Mankind doesn't yet possess the wisdom to use the weapons and inventions of the Nobility. All they would bring is untold death and destruction."

"Ohhhhh," the baron groaned, and then he realized something. "This is *my* warehouse! How'd you activate the self-destruct mechanism?"

"Twenty-nine minutes to go."

Bounding to his feet, the baron clanked over to the cyborg horse, reached up for the saddle, and mounted the steed with an ease that made the hoarse voice gasp aloud.

"I'm off! See you later!"

Digging his heels into the cyborg horse, the baron began to gallop off down the road to the right. "Oh, so I've lost him, have I? I bet that bastard's beside himself right now!" the Nobleman said, chortling in the saddle, and then his collar was caught from behind, he was raised into the air and set down in front of the saddle, and the figure in black running alongside him rose like a wraith.

A spot of prismatic light formed in one part of the valley and swiftly spread out like ripples on the water, filling the entire valley floor, melting stone, metal, and all other matter down to an atomic level after the horse and its strange riders had reached a safe distance. From a bluff to the west of the valley, the pair watched the multicolored dome of light tingeing the darkness. Already fading, the light was swallowed by the darkness before any thought could be given to its ephemeral nature.

"How long do you think it took me to collect the treasures I had stored there?" the baron grumbled. Both of them had gotten down from the horse. "Three centuries, I tell you. Three hundred years! With our technology, synthesizing gemstones was child's play, but everything in there was the genuine article. Oh, what a waste!"

"What you've got there should be plenty. Better hope they deflect all the stakes and arrows headed your way," the hoarse voice told him, and then the Hunter headed back over to the cyborg steed.

"Wait! Not so fast!" the baron called to him.

D knew what he wanted. The reason he halted was because compared to last time, the Nobleman sounded much more confident—even brimming with arrogance. The Hunter's keen eyes made out the bald baron grinning in the darkness.

"I've been curious about something from the first time I saw you. You have those good looks, and they call you D. So I'm wondering, did anyone ever tell you about me?"

D's silence was his reply.

The baron's smile grew broader. It also took on an evil shape, as if it'd extracted darkness from the night. "Is that so? It would seem *he* didn't tell you anything about me." Chuckling, he added, "He's a cautious man—for someone called the *Sacred Ancestor*."

The next instant, there was a cry that was difficult to describe—a cry of despair, or a death rattle, or perhaps both—and the rotund figure leapt back. No, he didn't leap; he was sent flying. Knocked back by a blow from a killing lust with all the substance of a solid object. Thrown all the way to the edge of the bluff, he fortunately halted just as he was about to fall off.

"Wh—what in the—" he sputtered, every inch of him quivering as badly as his voice. For some reason, there was steam rising from his bald pate.

"I don't know what you might've heard, but since you've mentioned the Sacred Ancestor, I take it you're ready to meet your maker," D said, his voice the same wintry night as always. No, it was different. He was like someone else entirely.

"No, I'm not! Not at all!"

Perhaps sensing something from D as he merely stood there, the baron desperately struggled to get back to his feet and walk away—but it was clear he was so cowed that every attempt ended with him falling over again and crying out in pain. Still, he managed to tell D, "I see what the situation is. But if you do anything to me, you'll regret it later. D, I'm the only Noble who knows even more about you than the Sacred Ancestor."

Those words were even more daunting than D's murderous intent. Who would've thought he'd hear such a thing from this Nobleman, of all people, in this, of all places? It was completely unexpected, as if a mole had just explained the mysteries of the cosmos.

D took a determined step forward. The chubby baron bounded back. It was rather a nice leap, considering the golden armor he wore, although he couldn't help raining diamond necklaces and gold bracelets on the ground as he landed.

"W-will you take me with you? If so, I'll tell you everything I know—ahhhh?"

His cry echoed from the opposite side of the hill. He'd landed, apparently surprised to find himself hitting a sloping path instead of the

level ground he'd expected.

"He's a wolf in sheep's clothing," the hoarse voice said. It sounded thoroughly disgusted as it continued, "For the life of me, I can't see how he might have any connection to you. I'm sure every word out of that little con man's mouth is a lie."

"What's that you say?" a voice protested further down the sloping road.

"Put a cork in it," the hoarse voice blurted back. "Okay, go ahead and tell me where *he* is right now, then."

The reply came quickly. "Someplace far away, but close at hand."

"Oh, that's just total crap. Right?"

"No," D replied.

"What?" the hoarse voice exclaimed in a tone tinged with astonishment.

Just then, a voice concealed by the darkness and the slope of the land had said something no one could've expected. They were frozen. Not just D, but his left hand as well.

"But that's just . . ." the hoarse voice began to say, sounding like a dead man.

"You of all people must understand," said the voice of the unseen figure, but it had become that of someone else. Though it came from ground level, it seemed to rain down on them from the heavens. "The key to making nocturnal Nobility walk in the light of the sun!" said the baron's voice. "The Sacred Ancestor managed to come up with an equation, but he couldn't reach the solution. I alone was able to do so. I, the one and only Baron Alpulup Macula! Of course, even if I gave them the solution, no one save the Sacred Ancestor could work it through. Once I realized the true power of those who feared the Nobility, D, I wanted to flee to the far reaches of the galaxy. However, by that point the regularly scheduled flight service had been abolished, and it was too much trouble to arrange it through shadier channels. And so I buried myself underground."

As his voice streamed through the night air, it played a mournful melody. The song of extinction touched the heartstrings of all.

"It seems you're not lying," D said softly.

III

"Of course I'm not," said the rotund figure wobbling back up the pass. Perhaps he'd bumped into a rock or something, because he had a lump on his forehead and his eyes were teary. Sniffling, he wiped his eyes and said, "That's as far as the story goes. Take me with you if you want more, and I'll give you bits and pieces along the way. Don't you want to know all the mysteries about your birth, D?"

"I have no interest in myself," D said, wheeling his steed around.

“Wait. I’ll give you a little taste,” Baron Macula shouted, quickly changing his tack. “The fact of the matter is, the ol’ Sacred Ancestor objected to my solution to the equation. Indeed, several solutions exist, and he and I arrived at ours through different methods. Either one of them can be used to make Nobles capable of walking in the light of the sun. However, they don’t live long. Six months at best. Both of us made improvements to our solutions, but that only added a few years to their lives.”

The hoarse voice went on the attack. “It’s a waste of time. The Nobility are beasts that prowl the darkness, of course. How many lives do you have to toy with in the pursuit of stupid hopes and ideas before you’re satisfied?”

“That’s the crux of it,” the baron said, his expression charged with all the excitement of a fledgling actor approaching his first big line. “To be sure, our solutions to the equation were incomplete. So, before burying myself underground, I once again went over the equation from its very core principles. And those efforts ultimately bore fruit. You see, I came up with a perfect equation and solution for making Nobles who could walk in the light of day.”

“So, you mean to say all the solutions up until that point were wrong?”

“A variable was placed incorrectly, you see. We knew it was in there, but had it in the wrong place. The Sacred Ancestor was certain we’d be fine without it, but that sort of arrogance has no place in physics. Ha, ha, ha!”

“Then Nobles will be able to walk in daylight forever?” D said, his voice like icy rain falling softly from the night sky.

The baron’s laughter was cut short. “Yes. And I told the Sacred Ancestor as much, while I was locked in a stasis field. He’s something else, I tell you. In the thirty minutes memory persisted after opening the field, he told me he’d managed to make one perfect specimen—meaning the DNA.”

“Hey,” the hoarse voice said, the word echoing hollowly in the dome of its astonishment.

In the past, an enormous presence of unknown nature had told D, *You are my only success.*

Twisting around, D asked, “Are you talking about me?”

“If you want to find out, you’ll have to take me with you. Well? How about it? What will it be?”

On seeing the rider and his steed starting to walk away again, the baron leapt up.

“You truly disappoint me. Hey, wait! Would you hold *on* a minute? Naturally, the Sacred Ancestor will want the new equation. He’s certain to come see me.”

Out in the darkness, the hoofbeats halted.

“Don’t you understand? Stick with me, and you’ll see the Sacred Ancestor. Isn’t that what you want?”

“Why do you think that?” said a voice that spread through the baron’s ears.

“Because that’s the way it has to be. His hopes rocked the very foundations of the Nobility. How many lives, human and Noble, do you think have been sacrificed on that altar? Ah, even now the cries of those women and children, their babies, come back to me. You, D, and your mother—”

Suddenly, the baron slapped both hands over his mouth. He realized his error.

However, his fear-filled eyes reflected a young man in black who remained as tranquil as the darkness. “Get on,” he said softly.

“Okay!” the baron said, dashing toward the horse. On his way there, he tripped and fell flat on his face once. Apparently his amazing leaping power only came into play when he was escaping from danger. As his foot wouldn’t even reach the stirrup, D had to give him a hand up.

“It’s amazing how short the bugger’s legs are,” the hoarse voice commented with dismay. “They can’t be more than a foot and a half long.”

“Oh, shut up!” the baron shouted, wrapping his arms around D’s waist. “Do legs make the man? To the contrary. Do you think women find men over six and a half feet tall attractive?”

“Okay, what makes a man, then?” the hoarse voice inquired.

“Hmmm . . .”

“The head? You’re nuts if you think that! There’s only one thing that determines the worth of anything with human form—the face!”

“The face?” the baron said, growing introspective.

Perhaps tired of the whole matter, D said nothing as he delivered a kick to his horse’s flanks.

They’d gone only about thirty feet before they heard the distinct sound of an approaching engine behind them. And mixed with it was a low and distant cry of “Help!” It was a woman’s voice. A young one’s.

“Oh my,” the baron said, licking his chops as he turned for a gander, but then he donned a look of suspicion. “Why aren’t you stopping?” he asked the silent D. “She’s pleading for help. Shouldn’t you do something?”

Those hardly seemed the actions or the words of a Noble.

“Because it’s not our job,” the hoarse voice said, and it too seemed a bit lamenting as the sound of the engine came nearer.

Looking back again, the baron let out a puzzled, “Huh?”

Utterly naked, a girl floated in midair. She had to have been about sixteen or seventeen. The moonlight couldn’t have been faulted if it admired her tempting skin and full, shapely breasts. But perhaps it was incorrect to say she was utterly naked. From the waist down, the girl

was concealed by the darkness. Lips that would've seemed unnaturally thin and red by the light of day trembled, spilling cries of "Help!"

"Oh, she's a real beauty, isn't she?" the baron said. The instant he broke into a lewd grin, he cried out in shock, "What in the—"

His words hung in the air as his body zipped forward. The cyborg horse had broken into a gallop. Clinging madly to D's waist, he shouted, "What are you doing?" at the Hunter even as he heard a series of awful, ground-shaking sounds closing on them from behind.

The girl was following them. But whose footsteps were those? The shadowy form charging toward them from some twenty yards away wasn't that of a girl. It was a machine that consisted of four enormous steel limbs and a bare frame. Nevertheless, it moved with a smoothness reminiscent of an animal. Its neck stretched a good fifteen feet into the air, and the end of it fused with the girl's lower body.

"What the hell is this thing?" the baron said, eyes bulging.

"I've never heard of anything like this being in the valley," the hoarse voice said with equal amazement.

"I saw it in the cavern," stated a cool and composed voice.

That was followed by the hoarse voice, saying, "You're responsible for this. Some of your property escaped before the explosion!"

Once the hoarse voice had pointed that out, the baron suddenly cried, "Ah!" His eyes filled with recognition. "Now that you mention it, I have seen her before! Actually, it was a device that utilized a woman as bait to catch humans."

"Who'd build something like that?" asked the hoarse voice.

Puffing his chest, the baron replied, "Who but *I* could've built such a thing?"

"Yet you forgot all about it?"

"It was a silly little proof of concept. And it didn't even work terribly well. As punishment, I relegated it to a corner of the warehouse, but it managed to escape, I see. Ouff!"

The baron's words gave way to a cry and he fell from the back of the horse. He'd just taken an elbow to the face from D. Bouncing a few times like a rubber ball, he came to rest at the side of the road. The enormous mechanical beast raced past him.

"His attitude a little more than you could stand?" D's left hand inquired.

"Too heavy," D replied succinctly, leaping up on the back of his steed. Keeping the reins in his left hand, he stood, his right hand reaching for the scabbard on his back. Over his head, the naked girl was drifting down.

"Help! Help! Help!" Tears welled in her eyes, and her willow-thin eyebrows quaked with fear. Her trembling lips knew only how to form that one word. "Help!"

From somewhere in the frame of the machine, a black whip whistled

out. It would split the flesh of any man snared by the girl's entreaties. The instant it was about to touch D, his steel flashed into action.

The moon alone was witness. It heard the hum of what remained of the black whip, and saw how exquisitely D sailed through the air, even if he didn't fly close enough to it. Ah, the hem of his coat spread like wings, the blue pendant conspired with the moonlight, and the blade in his hand let that same light of the moon testify to the keenness of its edge.

Though the neck of the mechanical beast was eighteen inches thick, D's sword went halfway through it. The machine arched backward. The way its limbs twitched was reminiscent of a human being. Black fluid gushed from it. Not blood, but oil. Still, the writhing machine sprayed it around like blood, looking like a titanic beast in its death throes. And at the end of its neck, the pale girl cried out for aid. An unending cry of "Help!"

Cutting the whip once more when it came whistling at him, D then hacked his blade into the gore-spurting neck again. Cruelly enough, he struck in exactly the same place. The head came off. At last the great beast fell. Its speed unchanged from its charge, its upper body slumped forward, and the instant it made contact with the ground, the enormous form flipped over. Sheer momentum was the only way to describe it. Shaking the earth, crushing rocks, it could only keep flipping end over end in an accursed roll. Before long, the rumbling of the earth and the beast's twitching died down as the young man in black stood on the steely corpse in the moonlight. That young man, who stood in one place so long, as if contemplating life and death. D. Walking along the neck of the great beast, he leapt down to the ground from the end of it. At his feet, a pale figure cried out softly and sadly, "Help!"

Whether or not he heard the cry was unclear. D walked on. With his fifth step, he looked back. The massive form was turning transparent and being swallowed by the darkness, like a fade-out in the movies. The device hadn't been built to self-destruct.

At that point, D heard a voice issue from the heavens. *We meet again. It's been quite a while.*

D's left hand reached into his coat, but the hoarse voice stopped him, saying, "Don't bother. It's no use."

Was there nothing you could do, D?

When the baron managed to drag himself over a short while later, covered with cuts and scrapes and feeling like he had one foot in the grave, the young man was standing stock still with his sword already sheathed, looking terribly isolated with his faint shadow.

THE MANSE OF THE CULTURED LADY

chapter 4

I

It was daybreak by the time they reached the town of Nieto.

Apparently quite elated to be back in a human town after five millennia, the baron's eyes gleamed as he said, "Hmm, things don't seem to have changed much while I slumbered. Well, the human race reached completion at a fairly low level. Perhaps they don't really want to change. Oh, that woman over there is simply stunning, isn't she? My, just look at the size of her breasts! That hourglass shape! Mmmmm, and a derrière that sticks out like nobody's business! That's what I call progress. I retract my earlier statement."

This Nobleman didn't seem like he had anything to do with either the Sacred Ancestor or "progress."

D first headed for the stables. His cyborg horse would need maintenance.

"Stick with me," he ordered the baron.

"As if a Noble would enter some shack that reeks of horses! I'll wait here," Macula replied, steering clear of the entrance to the maintenance area.

And yet, when D came back, the hoarse voice said in disbelief, "He's not here!"

Soon after the baron had exited the stables, the mocking laughter of children flowed in from the right. In the narrow alley, he was surrounded by at least half a dozen boys.

"This guy's delusional!"

"Noble, my ass! Who ever heard of a Noble out in broad daylight? And look at that funny armor he's got on. Hey, let's throw rocks at it!"

"What are you talking about? This is the armor of a Noble. Can't you see the grace and dignity in my features?"

The baron stood with his chest puffed out, but the boys only looked down at him with scorn. They all stood at least a head taller than him.

"You bald-headed liar! You've got a face like an octopus's ass. Like hell you're a Noble. Hey, unless you want the crap beaten out of you, you'd better give us some money."

"What do you mean, you wretched human children? You should be thankful for the opportunity to meet a genuine member of the Greater Nobility. Try any foolishness, and you shall be severely reprimanded."

"Just try it, you bald midget!"

The largest boy stepped in front of the baron.

“Ohhhh,” the baron said as he inched backward. “Stupid brats—are you familiar with the expression *twenty-three skidoo*?”

“No. What’s it mean?”

“This!”

For a moment, they were left stunned by the way the baron had suddenly turned around and sprinted away.

“After him!” the largest boy ordered, the whole group tearing off after the Nobleman and surrounding him again in short order. His legs weren’t nearly as long as theirs. That was followed shortly by a cry of “Let ’im have it!” The diminutive figure was immediately swallowed up by the mob of attacking boys.

“Stop that this instant,” a soft voice called out to them several seconds later.

The boys’ violence was stemmed both by the quiet dignity of the female voice and the knowledge of whom it belonged to.

“Lady Millian?”

Dressed in an elegant silk suit, the woman possessed a youthful beauty that hardly seemed to suit the title of “lady.”

The boys’ eyes turned to the man who stood behind her like a wall dressed in black. Judging from the buggy whip he held, he was likely both her coachman and her bodyguard.

“Save me,” the baron said, and as he took refuge behind the driver’s back, blood dripped from his head.

“You’re wicked children, aren’t you?” Lady Millian said, glaring at them. “Shall I tell the sheriff to make you spend the night alone out in the forest of the Nobility? The next time I see you doing this, you’ll not get off lightly!”

“Sheesh, what a hysterical bitch!”

“Dyke!” the boys said, pelting her with insults as they ran away.

“What little brats. They don’t feel the slightest bit of respect toward their elders. I should’ve expected as much from humans, I suppose,” the baron muttered to himself as the woman looked down coolly at him. She was reasonably tall.

“From the way you refer to them as *humans*, could it be that you’re __”

“Oh, yes, I’m a Noble,” he replied, puffing his chest, but he immediately deflated again. “No one believes me, though.”

“Understandable,” Lady Millian said, staring intently at the baron and biting back a laugh. “You cast a shadow on the ground, and above all there’s the matter of you standing in the sunlight. Have you some proof you’re a Noble? Could you transform yourself into a bat and flit around?”

“Those tricks are strictly for engineered Nobles. I, on the other hand __”

The baron’s voice halted there because of the blood flowing from his

forehead. Running along the side of his nose, it'd reached his lips.

"As you can see, I'm the genuine article."

The baron opened his mouth. A pair of fangs caught the woman's eye. He now seemed like an entirely different person, and she froze in her tracks.

The great wall of a man lurched forward, but she said, "Totem," stopping him. "A genuine Noble," she murmured in astonishment.

"That's right."

"In that case . . . I have a request for you."

The emotion choking her voice made the baron grin. Did his Noble senses tell him something?

"However, discussing it here would be somewhat improper . . . Would you be so good as to come to my home?"

"Are you sure that's okay? I am a Noble, you know."

"That's precisely why I offer you this invitation."

"Very well, then. But in return, you mustn't hold whatever happens against me." As he focused a look of unrestrained longing at the nape of the young beauty's neck, the baron licked his lips. Though he had the three strikes of being short, fat, and bald against him, that craving alone was proof positive that he was indeed a member of the Nobility.

Deciding there was no point searching for the baron in the immediate vicinity, D walked straight down to the sheriff's office. He told the stunned man behind the desk, "I'd like you to tell me who's the most eccentric person in town."

After some consideration, the sheriff replied, "That would be Lady Millian. She's a widow who lives out in the forest on the western edge of town. Been a bit odd ever since her husband passed away two years back. It seems she's been collecting data on the Nobility from all over the country."

"Does she intend to turn her husband into a Noble or something?"

The sudden change in D's voice brought the sheriff back to his senses. Glaring at the Hunter, he said, "Say something like that to anybody in town and they'll string you up on the spot. I won't even get there to stop 'em until they're done lynching you. We won't stand to have you doing anything to hurt or embarrass that lady."

"Oh, really? She's that beloved, is she?" asked the hoarse voice.

"Not just her. Her husband was also an outstanding person. He laid the foundation for development in this town, and led us through the hardest times. And as soon as the town had settled down, he gave up all his powers and positions of honor, and went back to living like an ordinary citizen. Even now, the whole town is pulling for the lady, and we won't let her be ridiculed."

"Well, I'll be—gyaaaah!"

Stifling the hoarse voice's mocking remark, D turned to leave. "Sorry

to bother you."

Beauty's spell over the sheriff was finally broken.

"What did you come here for? Where are you going? If you try anything funny with that lady, I'll—"

The door closed.

Growing pale, the sheriff raced over to the cage where they kept the carrier pigeons.

Alighting from the carriage and looking up intently at her manse, the baron gasped with surprise and turned a somersault.

That was close! the Nobleman thought. If anyone from town had been with him and could have read his mind, they'd have cocked their head to one side and wondered what had been close.

Awaiting the baron there in the sunlight was a fashionable chateau hemmed in by greenery. Uniformed butlers greeted them in the foyer, and the row of maidservants lined up in the grand hall bowed in unison while the baron walked proudly in the fore, head high and shoulders back as he strode down the corridor. In that regard, he was a Noble through and through.

At the end of a long corridor, he was given a guest room that was also opulently furnished. Almost everything in the house seemed to be made of glass and crystal. He excitedly looked all around, examined the furnishings, stuck his head out the window and shouted a greeting, and was jumping up and down on his bed when the lady and Totem came in.

Sipping from the glass the man brought him, the baron licked his lips and said, "It's blood, isn't it?"

"I thought our Noble guest should have only our finest hospitality."

The baron was finally convinced the woman was crazy. She'd invited a Noble to her home, and offered him the thing he loved best. These were hardly the hallmarks of sanity. A smile naturally rose on his lips—the malicious grin of a Noble.

Setting down the glass, he asked, "And in return for this hospitality, you desire something?"

"Yes," the lady said, nodding. "Please, save my husband."

"Ah!"

The lady stood up. "Rather than tell you, I should first let you see him. My humble request can wait until after that."

"We're lost," the left hand told the Hunter soon after they started down the road that led from town to Lady Millian's chateau. They had crossed the brook and the bridge that were visible up ahead only a few minutes earlier. "If we keep going like this, it'll just be more of the same. Could be something the Nobility set up, or a natural occurrence, or even some trick the humans are pulling—so, what do we do?"

"Don't you know?"

"Hmph. Getting out's easy enough, but I don't think there's any chance our short, bald Noble is having himself a grand old time. Serves him right. Why don't we let things run their course for a while? It'd teach the little bastard a lesson for never listening."

"If it only taught him a lesson, it wouldn't be a problem."

"Okay, okay! I'll make us a path now."

Taking his left hand from the reins, D let it fall by his side, where it opened naturally. A tiny face appeared in the palm.

"It's one of the Nobility's mazes, sure enough, but probably only for residential use. Wind alone should do, I suppose."

Before it could finish speaking, the air started to howl. The trees to either side of the road shook, their branches and leaves all bending in unison toward the Hunter's left hand. Toward the tiny face in the palm of his hand—and its even tinier mouth. It was sucking in air with terrific force. The wind was so great, the scenery became distorted. The wooden bridge collapsed, the trees tore apart—and then even the colors drained from the scene as it became a fog swallowed by the mouth on the Hunter's palm.

The mouth closed.

Immediately, the wind ceased.

The cyborg horse whinnied. Rider and steed stood in the same spot as before, but the brook and the bridge had suddenly vanished. Only the road the cyborg horse was on stretched before them. In silence, without lauding the left hand for its efforts, D gave a kick to his steed's flanks.

A gunshot echoed.

Bright blood and bits of his coat exploded in vermilion from D's left shoulder.

II

D wheeled his horse around. Not a hint of pain colored the pale beauty of his heaven-sent countenance.

Down the road, a voice called out, "Ha! You did it!"

Just a hundred yards behind the Hunter, a man with a single-shot rifle was down on one knee with his weapon raised, while a number of men around him were slapping him on the back.

"That's what he gets for trying some funny shit."

"The carrier pigeon from the sheriff told us to set up the labyrinth, but look what happened to that. Well, this is what we do to anyone who wants to mess with the lady."

"Oh, he's still alive. Put another slug in him!"

Receiving another slap on the back, the man with the rifle slid back the bolt handle, ejecting a gleaming cylinder. A spent brass casing. Leaning the rifle against his shoulder, he pulled another large round from the ammo belt around his waist and loaded it into his weapon.

Judging by how he had to focus on sliding the bolt back into place, he wasn't a sharpshooter by trade. He merely happened to be the best shot among the group of men in the area assigned to operate the labyrinth.

At the same time he put the stock against his shoulder, he drew a bead. A cry of fear choked in his throat. D had closed to within ten yards of him. The gunman could tell it was the Hunter's unnatural speed that'd rooted his stunned compatriots, leaving them unable to even call out to him. Plus, they'd looked at him. They'd seen D's face, so handsome it could steal even a man's soul. Still, the gunman got off a shot. Where that bullet actually went he'd never know, and the instant the cyborg horse sailed over their heads, the gunman's right arm came off at the shoulder.

Startled by the cries that finally issued from their own mouths, the men plunged into the forest.

As the writhing gunman's blood stained the ground, D quietly walked over. He'd already dismounted. He stood beside the man. The wind tossed the hem of his coat, and the tip of his longsword was thrust under the nose of his foe, who groaned in a sea of blood—such a vision of beauty there in the stark sunlight. How well the hue of darkness, death, and bright blood suited this man. D.

"If I don't stop the bleeding, you'll die."

His voice was cold—and telling the truth in such a tone should've made it unsettling. But forgetting even his own hellish pain, the man looked up at D with eyes clouded with rapture. "Please . . . save . . . me."

"I'll fix you up. And then you'll answer some questions."

The man nodded. His eyes never left D.

Reaching out with his left hand, D touched the man's wound. A second later the bleeding stopped completely, as if time itself had paused, and the man's entire body felt at ease. His pain had faded.

The Hunter's blade flashed before his face.

"Who is this Lady Millian? What's her connection to the Nobility?"

The man let out a deep breath.

The room was swimming in light. It was a sight that surpassed even the guest room from which he'd just come. However, the light and the breeze that tossed the white lace curtains were difficult to reconcile with the shadow of death that hung over the room. In the center of the room was an opulent bed, and the baron looked down on what lay in it: a blackened, withered mummy, with scant hair remaining on its head, the skull pressing against the skin of the face, and teeth and gums exposed, all looking more unsettling in the light than they would in the darkness.

“This is my husband, Jaoul,” the lady said, her voice brimming with a sadness that was all too genuine.

“Hmm.”

Not seeming at all afraid, the baron waddled closer and touched his child-sized hand to the man’s face.

“Hmm.”

His brow furrowed dubiously.

“Come now,” he said, using both hands to pry the man’s jaw open. “What’s this?”

He opened one eyelid, which was like a crack in a rock. Though his actions seemed like horseplay, the baron’s eyes were deadly serious, his expression that of a scholar deep in thought.

“I see,” he said, striking the mummy in the vicinity of the abdomen through the bedcovers. “He’s still alive, isn’t he?”

The lady and Totem looked at each other, and then her eyes grew warm and damp. “Yes . . . and now,” she began, her voice choked with emotion, “and now . . . you have come. You, who can restore him.”

“Is he your husband, your boyfriend, or just a lover?”

“He’s my husband.”

“Why’s he such a mess?” the baron asked bluntly, but the lady didn’t display the least bit of anger. Her heart was already filled to overflowing with expectation and emotion.

It was Totem who glared long and hard at the baron.

“Ah, yes,” the lady began, nodding and wiping the corners of her eyes with a silk handkerchief. She appeared as nothing less than a widow who’d lost the love of her life. “You see, my husband was a researcher focusing on the Nobility. This chateau was once a Noble’s summer retreat. Five years ago, my husband borrowed the place from the town and began his research into the physiology and technology of the Nobility.”

As a result, he had uncovered certain techniques and learned how to use them. How to use space-warping technology to generate labyrinths, how to make photon weaponry, and how to give a body the superhuman strength of a Noble, among other things. He passed this information on to the populace, and received overwhelming support. He was even granted use of that chateau in perpetuity. The track Millian’s husband’s research took led him even further. Into a place deep in the bottomless darkness.

“My husband wanted to become a Noble.”

As he learned more about the Nobility, her husband’s interest had shifted from the civilization they’d built to their physical abilities. There were certain words that danced and tempted men like luminescent insects out in the darkness. *Ageless and undying.*

“Firstly, my husband tried to obtain immortality without actually becoming a Noble. And once he realized he’d failed, he decided to become a Noble rather than give up.”

“He was a fool,” the baron spat. “And this was the result? As a mummy, it takes almost nothing to sustain his life—he certainly could live a long time like that, I suppose. But he’d be no better than a motionless living corpse.”

“Please, restore him.”

“What?”

“Please, restore my husband to his former self.”

The baron responded to her doleful request with a simple, “Can’t be done.”

“Why not?”

“Though he was foolish, your husband actually lit on something rather good. I can’t fault his methodology or his practice. There wasn’t a single mistake—except for the fact that a human can’t become one of the Nobility without being bitten. What you have here is the logical conclusion. Leave him as he is now, and he should last another three centuries. But as a mummy that never drinks or eats, but merely breathes.”

“But . . . But you’re a Noble who can walk in the light of day . . . As such, you should be able to restore my husband . . .”

“Hmm . . .” The baron looked from the withered face in the bed to the beautiful woman, then suddenly took the husband’s jaw in hand and pulled back on it. “You’re quite an attractive woman. Come to mention it, unlike all the others of my kind, I have yet to taste the pleasures of a human female. I was always so absorbed in my research, you see. What the—”

His rotund form leapt back a good ten feet. Where he’d been, a terrific killing lust had coalesced in human form. It was Totem.

“I suppose I shouldn’t have insulted the head of the household in front of such a faithful retainer. However, you do get what I was driving at, don’t you?”

Totem was about to step forward, but the lady stopped him.

As she looked at the baron through half-closed lids, her eyes carried hatred—and a gleam of irrepressible sexuality. “I will comply. However, I don’t want my blood to be . . .”

“Understood,” the baron said, breaking into a salacious grin. He purred like a cat, “Your mistaken human beliefs to the contrary, we have other ways of sating our desire besides the sacred act of drinking blood. We’re fully capable of enjoying relations between men and women just as humans do. Do you hear that, you big lug? Now, come to me, woman,” he said, beckoning to her.

Eyes downturned, the lady went over to the baron and took his hand. “The bedroom is this way.”

“Goody,” the baron exclaimed without any embarrassment. He even rubbed his hands together. Though a smile that could be described as less than innocent if not downright scornful flitted across the lady’s lips, he didn’t notice, stepping ahead of her and reaching for the doorknob.

“Come with me, then.”

The instant the door opened, the baron’s back was given an incredibly forceful push. Though a Noble, his weight was no greater than that of a normal human being. He fell forward with a shriek, at which point the door shut, and he only had time to shout, “Wait a

minute!" before losing consciousness.

Surrounded by an overpowering smell that would likely drive even a human mad, his senseless body writhed, convulsed, and vomited.

Some time after his crazed movements had ceased, each and every window began to open without a sound. The room that the baron had entered had been filled with the smell of the only thing humans knew to be effective against the Nobility—garlic. When the door opened again, a pair of figures stood there.

"That was easier than expected—who knew there were such stupid Nobles," the enormous figure sneered.

"Walking in the light of day—that's the one thing a Noble shouldn't be able to do," the lithe figure laughed.

The chilly air of winter filled the room. The unconscious Nobleman lay in the placid sunlight. There was only the laughter of the lady of the house and her servant, hers ringing out high, and his low. The next thing he knew, his brain felt numb.

Really did a number on my sense of smell. That was his first thought. Before he passed out, it'd been clear what'd been done to him.

Though the Nobility were immortal and possessed regenerative capabilities, it took at least three days to recover from this traditional attack. His nerves would be paralyzed for a whole day. And yet, perhaps erring on the side of caution, they had secured the baron's body to the bed with three straps. The lights and equipment in the rock-walled room told him in an instant that it was an operating room.

A pair of figures looked down on the baron, one from either side. Despite the white gowns, surgical masks, and rubber gloves they wore, their eyes made their identities clear.

"You bastards intended to do this to me from the very start, didn't you? You'll pay for this!"

"Please forgive me," the lady apologized. Both her voice and her gaze remained cool. "As my husband neared his final days, he wrote down what should be done to treat him. He said to give him a transfusion of blood from a Noble."

The baron bugged his eyes, gasping and struggling. "Then it was all a pack of lies, was it? Lousy humans! I was going to cure him!"

"In exchange for me," the lady said in a tone that cut as well as the scalpel she held. "To be honest, I was concerned about this, but you can see how smoothly it went. I thank you, dear Nobleman."

"It's nothing, really. But you shouldn't need a scalpel for a blood transfusion."

"His instructions were that after the transfusion, we were to feed him the frontal lobe of a Noble's brain."

The baron began to shout. "Okay, that's where you're mistaken! That's a huge misunderstanding. It's the very zenith of quackery!"

"Do you know what happens when a Noble loses their brain?"

"Why, yes, I do. You see, some Nobles develop neuroses. I was given permission to perform various experiments on them on the condition that I euthanized them. The brain regenerates."

"Then I wouldn't think there's anything to get so excited about."

"But you're in hell until it does grow back. Depending on how much is removed, it can be three days and nights of screaming agony. And afterwards, they're not quite right. Not for me, no, thank you!"

"But it's for my husband."

"Hey! Stop it!" the baron cried, and he began to thrash in earnest.

Listening to the creaking of his bed, the lady merely shook her head sadly. "Those bonds were made to withstand the unholy strength of ten Nobles. Please forgive me."

The blade of the scalpel was placed against the baron's forehead. Just as her hand started to make the incision, there was a faint sound from the windowpane.

III

Even before she gripped her wrist, the lady backed away and her scalpel hit the floor. From between her fingers, a rough wooden needle jutted.

Suddenly a shadow moved across the sun. The hue of darkness tinged the window that now was marred with a small hole. That darkness shattered the glass, taking the form of a young man in black who landed on the floor.

"D!"

The Hunter advanced without a word and the lady was frozen in place, but Totem stepped in between them. He threw a straight right punch at D's face. D stopped it with his left palm.

"Oh, my!" The cry sounded for all the world like it came from his palm. D had been physically knocked back to the window.

"Watch it," the baron shouted to him from the bed. "That thing's a sorcerous machine man. He can't be destroyed through physical means."

Totem went over to the wall to his right. A longsword hung there. Though it served as a decoration, it was a real weapon. Drawing it, he made a swipe in the air. The wind it created rattled the windowpanes. Lunging forward, he kept his left hand raised for balance.

D's sword whistled from the sheath on his back. Totem's expression changed. D extended his right hand and raised his left. Neither made the first move, but their blades flashed into action simultaneously. The gleams crossed, with one of them slashing diagonally through the sunlight.

There was a thud against the floor. Still clutching the sword, Totem's arm had been taken off at the elbow. And as was normal for a blow from D's blade, the stump exposed gleaming metallic bone and a silvery

bundle of wire nerves. Those wires dripped down all over the floor and the severed arm. At the same time, silvery filaments also shot out of the arm on the floor. And then they connected in midair, swiftly melding together to lift the severed arm and align it with the stump. This thing could revive its very nerves, something even the Nobility's indestructible nature supposedly didn't allow. And weren't these inanimate wires? It was magic. The Nobility had developed sorcery that could give life and regenerative abilities to even inanimate objects.

"Looks like someone learned how to work sorcery on machines on the level of an overlord. If the woman's husband found out how to do that, he was no ordinary—oh!"

Totem charged at the Hunter. His steely arm thrust at D's chest with a speed on par with the Hunter's. Right before his eyes, D's body spun out of the way. The tip of Totem's blade met air by only a tenth of a second, and the spinning D caught him in the side with a blow from his left fist. Letting out a low groan, Totem staggered. It was unclear exactly when D had pulled out one of his wooden needles, but it was now driven halfway into the machine man.

Was it D's skill or his fiendish strength that allowed him to pierce, as if they were paper, skin and muscle renowned for their ability to deflect even bullets?

As the machine man turned to face his opponent again, he made another smooth and deadly thrust that tore through empty air, while the sword brought down from above cleaved him from the top of the head to the chin, and his massive form fell flat on his back. Tens of thousands of wires wriggled from either side of the cut like tentacles. Sparks flew. The wires that came together were knocked back viciously, then rose like cobras preparing to strike. They were never to be joined again, and it was only a few seconds later that the last pair of wires gave up the ghost, but D didn't have time to waste watching to be sure. He looked at the baron.

The cause of the Nobleman's pained cries became all too clear. The baron's right arm was exposed, and from it a crimson tube ran into the withered branch of an arm on the man in the next bed. The lady stood motionless on the other side of that bed. Needless to say, it was the spell of D's exquisite visage that flushed her face as red as blood.

"My dearest," the lady said. It wasn't a murmur to herself. It was a call.

D looked at the bed. The mummy had just finished sitting up.

"Watch . . . out . . ." the baron said feebly from the bed where he lay. His oily skin had dried out, his eyes were vacant, and he called to mind a slightly plump mummy. "This is a fellow . . . who ensorcelled a machine . . . And maybe his own . . ."

Not giving him the chance to finish what he was saying, the mummy leapt out of bed and jabbed his right arm through the Nobleman's heart.

D saw that from the wrist down his hand had become a sword. Pulling it back out of the baron, who'd fainted with an agonized cry, the mummy caught a reflection of D in his cloudy eyes.

"Dearest . . ." the lady cried out, running up behind him and throwing her arms around him.

Who would've believed that the mummy—her husband—would stab her through the side with his right hand?

The next time she said "dearest," it was a cry of pain.

Without a glance at the falling woman, D struck with his blade. The same blade D had used to cut down a mechanism equipped with regenerative abilities was now parried by the mummy's arms. The gleam sliced through them, sinking into the top of the mummy's head. With a mellifluous sound, the blade was deflected in a heartbeat by the helmet the mummy's skull had transformed into. A split second before the deflected blade's second swipe could make contact with the mummy's neck, it was covered by steely armor. The whole body had become lustrous and black, reflecting the sunlight.

"So, this is one of those 'iron men' I've heard about, is it?" the left hand murmured in a low voice. The skin, muscle, and bone of the mummy's body had been transformed into the black armor. Even his face was covered by an iron mask, leaving only his eyes faintly exposed. Gazing into them, D said, "You've failed. Giving a human the abilities of a Noble is a biological impossibility. The only thing you gained was the Nobility's cruelty."

The mummy's eyes blazed red. A blisteringly hot beam of crimson pierced D's chest. His eyes were transmitters for some kind of thermal beam—probably using infrared rays.

D's left hand went up. Once more the crimson flashes raced toward D's flaming chest. The light would bear witness. It would see the tiny face that formed in the palm of that hand. Its mouth pursed. In a long, thin sigh, it let out its breath. But was it that breath that made the thermal rays blur?

The thermal rays angled down. The tiny mouth snapped open as far as it could go. The red glow was sucked into it like a stream of blood. But who ever heard of a mouth that ate rays?

"That's a good hearty meal, there," the mummy heard a voice say.

D's chest remained engulfed in flames, but he became a black wind as he kicked off the floor. The blistering beams had been turned into life force by his body, making him look like a burning mannequin. There was no telling how much power he had behind the sword he brought down over the mummy's head. The steely armor that should've protected the mummy was split from the top of his head all the way down to his crotch, and then another horizontal slash left him in quarters that dropped to the floor. No blood flowed from him. He hadn't had any from the very start.

Sheathing his blade, D went over to the baron's bed, where he heard a woman's cry of "dearest" creeping across the floor.

"Where . . . did we . . . go wrong? You said you only . . . wanted to make secrets of the Nobility . . . serve humanity . . . And all I ever did . . . was cheer you on . . ."

"What's this? The woman's crawling over to her quartered husband!" the baron said from where he lay on the bed, his face pale but a gleam coming into his eyes. "This is the same man who stabbed her. What can she be thinking? Oh, she's holding him close. Are those tears? Why's she crying? Because you did such a beautiful job of chopping him up? Ouff!"

A savage blow from the Hunter to the baron's mountainous belly silenced the Nobleman. D then gazed at the dead on the floor as if they were part of his job.

Pulling the pieces of the mummy's corpse back together and hugging them tight, the lady breathed her last.

After delivering another blow to the baron's stomach to rouse him again, then freeing the blubbering Nobleman, D left the room first.

Blue skies, a breeze, and his cyborg horse were there to greet him. To welcome the young man who'd caused three deaths.

As the baron unsteadily tottered out and got on the back of the Hunter's steed, countless riders galloped in through the gates. "What's the story with these clowns?" the baron asked even as he ducked down behind D.

A group of armed riders blocked their path.

"How'd it go with Lady Millian?" the sheriff asked from the back of his steed.

"She died," D said in reply.

"Who killed her?"

"Her husband."

A murmur went through the group. The men exchanged glances, a number of them reaching for the stake guns they wore on their hips.

D got on his cyborg horse.

The astonishment was plain on the men's faces. In complete disregard of their orders, they opened a path to let the Hunter pass.

"Where are you going?" the sheriff asked.

"I don't know."

"Ordinarily, I'd have to detain you here until the circuit court arrived and we could get to the bottom of this."

"Is that what you're going to do?" D asked, already advancing down the path the other horses had cleared.

"Get going," the sheriff told him with a toss of his chin. "But in return, forget everything that happened here. The town of Nieto never heard of the two of you."

As the steed and its two riders walked away in silence, it was unclear if they heard the next thing he said.

“Those two were the terror of the community. Nobles, if there ever were any . . . They sure as hell weren’t human.”

And then the lawman heard something. The smaller of the two figures, with a little smirk on his face, said, “No, they were human.”

THE DEADLY AGREEMENT

chapter 5

I

Still strong, the sunlight bleached a bizarre little area just off the highway. It was a patch of green land that seemed to drink up every last sound—a world made up of grass, moss, and stands of trees. There, it was easy to see millennia of decay. There were crumbling castle walls and corridors, stone stairs, statues gazing up at the heavens, and golden rails that formed bizarre intersections—probably the remnants of a four-dimensional transport system. What Noble had it belonged to? Everything was green with moss, covered with vines, and decaying with the quiet cruelty of the passing years. The only intact piece of the Nobility's nocturnal grandeur was a realm of crystal-clear water—a large fountain and pool, and D and the baron were at the edge of it.

An hour had passed since they'd left the town of Nieto. Traveling in daylight had left the baron exhausted. "I can't do this anymore," he cried. "I'm dying. I'm going to burn away to nothing. Help me!"

Finally the baron succumbed to dehydration and fell off the horse, so D brought them to a shady spot that they were fortunate to be passing by. Grabbing the Nobleman by the collar and dunking him in the water, D put him in the shade of a hundred-yard-high monster elm, where the baron sprang back to life like a freshly soaked sponge.

"As I thought, I'm not quite used to moving around in the daylight yet. D, how long did it take you?"

There was no reply. D was on the marble rim, gazing at the blue water's surface.

Shrugging his shoulders, the baron continued, "Been that way since the day you were born, then? Hmm. By the look of things, it seems you're the only success of my theory and techniques. Actually, at that time, I hadn't even perfected them yet. It's just like *him* to manage it, much as I hate to admit it. Right now, my body is beat to hell, but the sunlight doesn't seem to bother you any more than piss on a frog's back."

"What a vulgar little creep you are."

The baron bugged his eyes. "Was that you? No, it couldn't be," he said, eyeing D intently, but avoiding his face. "Well, my research concerned pure Nobility, but you're a different case. You've got human blood in you. That's why you can walk in the light of day without it bothering you. An advantage of being a half-breed freak, in a manner of speaking. *He* certainly did some impetuous things. Ah, yes! That reminds me—" The baron's lips curled evilly. "Your relationship—"

D turned around. To face the baron.

At the same time, the baron looked behind him. There was the thunder of iron-shod hooves coming down the road that led back to the highway.

“What, is it the sheriff from Nieto and his goons?” the baron said without trying to conceal the uneasiness on his face, rising to his feet and waddling around behind D.

They counted ten cyborg horses. Armed more heavily than the sheriff and his men, these riders were all white with dust. They must’ve come quite a distance.

“We’re a patrol from the Capital,” said the rider who pulled up alongside them. “I’m the leader, Captain Smith. Is it true that one of you is a Noble who can walk in daylight?”

“No, that’s a lie,” said a voice from behind D’s back. Half of the baron’s pudgy face peeked out from behind the Hunter.

“Where did you hear that?” D asked.

The men looking down at him from horseback already wore entranced expressions.

“On our way to the village of Satori. We got word by carrier pigeon.”

“What do you want?”

“Oh, that? We want you to turn that Noble over to us.” The thick finger Smith extended was aimed at the baron, who’d promptly ducked his head again.

“Why?”

“A warrant for Baron Macula was discovered in the archives of the Capital’s Legal Affairs Bureau. He’s to be hauled to the nearest court within a hundred days of his revival and placed on trial there.”

“What’s the charge?”

“Mass murder.”

“Oh my!”

The sudden hoarseness of D’s voice made the men exchange glances.

“Also, confidence schemes involving fraudulent offers of marriage.”

At this point, D shut his eyes. He appeared speechless.

Clearing his throat, Smith continued, “In the summer of 5051, Baron Macula was charged with the crime of capturing and killing approximately half a million people, male and female, young and old, during the period from the autumn of 3022 until the spring of 5049. The plaintiffs are ninety-three villagers from the La Nuvall region. Roughly seven thousand years ago, in that district—now known as Nuvell—the baron not only slaughtered five thousand children, but he lured a good six hundred widows to his mansion with promises of marriage before killing them.”

“If that don’t beat all,” said the hoarse voice.

The men’s expressions changed, and their horses whinnied, backing away. Though the weather was unchanged, the air suddenly seemed to

have taken on the bite of an autumn frost.

"That's not right!" came a scream from behind D. "I didn't kill anyone! Those children were all used in experiments for a lofty goal!"

"Five thousand of them?"

At that question from D, the baron seemed to shrink to half his normal size. "That's right," he said. "But I don't recall ever forcing anyone to do anything. I explained the purpose of the experiments to them at length, then left it to them to decide for themselves! So, do you understand now?"

"According to the accounts, you used hypnotism."

The baron glared at Smith. "That, er—that was just for expedience, to make negotiations go smoothly, and—"

"What was your purpose?" asked Smith.

Fixed in every gaze, the baron seemed fidgety, looking around in all directions before steeling himself to the task. "To turn humans into Nobles, and Nobles into humans—and there you have it," he said, puffing out his chest.

There was a gleam in D's eye. That was all. Smith and his men couldn't grasp the fearful implications of the baron's words.

"Save your defense for the trial. At any rate, seven thousand years ago, a civil court heard the complaint. As the defendant is a Noble, any statutes of limitations don't apply. The closest courthouse to here would be Darlitton, but it'd take a month to get there. Instead, Zappara is to the west of here, and the circuit court is due to arrive there in seven days with the whole works. You'll have to accompany us there. *You* have any objection to that?"

His last remark was directed at the gorgeous Hunter.

"I certainly do!" came a resolute cry. The baron. Looking up at D as if to say, *Right? You do, don't you?*, he grabbed the hem of the Hunter's coat and tugged on it.

The men looked at each other. There were expressions of disbelief all around.

"Nope," D said.

"*Whaaaaaaat?*" It went without saying who screamed that. "D-d-d-don't you want to meet up with *him*?"

"Take him away," was D's callous reply, as if he'd already forgotten all about the baron—or as if the Nobleman had never existed in the first place.

"Very well."

Smith gave a toss of his chin, and a number of his men dismounted. The baron ran around like an escaped piglet, but they quickly caught him, slapped plastic cuffs on him, and loaded him onto a cyborg horse that served as their pack animal.

"Sorry to have taken your time," Smith said, finally smiling.

"No need to thank me. I'll be coming along with you," D told him,

surprising the lawman. “I’ll stay out of your way.”

“But . . . why would you do that?”

“This is a dangerous area. Every man you can get should make you feel that much safer.”

“That may be true, but . . .” Smith deliberated. It was tough being the leader. Looking at D for a few seconds, he shook his head. “No, I think I’ll pass. We can’t be relying on the strength of a drifter. Or would you care to share with us the reason why you were traveling with the baron?”

D was silent. The silence stretched a good distance.

Backing up about four paces, Smith turned his cyborg horse back the way they’d come. A hint of relief streamed into his features. The steeds all broke into a run in unison.

“Help! Murder!” the baron cried, and the man riding close at his right flank dug an elbow into him. “How long do you people hold a stupid grudge? Help! Save me! They’ll kill me!”

The cries of “Watch your mouth!” and “Damned Noble!” faded into the distance with the whinnying of their horses.

Once all sight of them and the echo of their iron-shod hooves was lost behind the castle walls, the hoarse voice inquired, “You’re fine with that?”

Saying nothing, D got back in the saddle and wheeled his steed around.

“Ah, I see. They can’t very well complain if you follow along behind them, eh? So, we take it nice and slow and tail ’em?”

At that instant, all four hooves tore into the ground.

“Wow—what’s wrong?” The voice of surprise quickly faded.

From the same direction the patrol had gone, gunfire now echoed.

“Bandits? This should be interesting. I wonder how they’ll handle that bald little Noble this time.”

As the hoarse voice was still cackling, a figure came into view up ahead. The Hunter was on a part of the highway hemmed by rocky mounds on either side. The sounds of gunfire had already died out.

“Halt!” one of the men on the road said, training a repeating rifle on the Hunter. Though he wore a harsh expression, no killing lust emanated from him.

“Hey, they’ve got on the same uniforms as those guys we just saw,” the hoarse voice whispered.

Lowering his gun, the man said, “We’re a patrol from the Capital. We encountered a group of bandits who were impersonating us to make off with an important figure, and then eliminated them. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to make a detour.”

The sight that spread before the Hunter’s eyes suggested that a detour might be the best idea. Horses and riders lay on the ground, some covered in blood, some burnt, a number of the beasts still

twitching. The legs that kicked vainly at the heavens were nothing short of an attempt to push away the approaching reaper.

II

"Hey, D!"

An egg-shaped figure was halfway up the rocky hillside to the left, waving his arm. It was the baron, but because a six-and-a-half-foot-tall giant of a man had him by the hand, he looked more like a chubby child. Several uniformed figures stood on the rocky hills to either side of the road with firearms in hand, looking down at the Hunter.

The heavily bearded giant came down to the highway with the baron, then went over to D. "I'm Captain Smith, head of this patrol," he said, touching his hand to the brim of his hat in greeting. He had an affable smile, and the baron was looking up at him amiably. "From what the baron just told me, it seems their leader was using the same name, eh?"

D maintained his silence.

Smith looked away.

"You used explosives to kill them all?" asked D. True to his nature, the young man said nothing about the brutality or cruelty of the action.

"They resisted arrest. Fortunately, we were able to take this Noble into custody without injury." The new Smith showed them pearly teeth. Black cylinders hung from the belt around his waist. Hand grenades. "We'll take charge of him and escort him back to the Capital. Okay, on your way, now."

"I'll bring him there," D said softly.

Smith's mouth dropped open. Eyes narrowing to bug-like specks, he asked, "What the hell's that supposed to mean?" His manner of speech had changed completely.

The lawman raised his right hand. It was unclear whether or not D knew that the men on the slopes brought their guns to bear in unison, but the Hunter said, "A patrol's duties don't include transporting Nobles. It's quite a distance to the Capital. Do you intend to abandon your mission so you can go there?"

"Why, that's . . ."

. . . *None of your damn business*, Smith thought, but he swallowed the rest of those words. *This young fella—he's got such a look in his eyes. You can see all the fires of hell in them! The only things that beautiful are angels, or else . . .*

Blinking repeatedly, he tested the firmness of the ground beneath his boots, then continued, "That's the orders we got from the Capital."

"What did the orders say?"

That really was none of his business. However, Smith didn't fight him. "Actually—"

Silence fell.

The hoarse voice was heard to say, “Pulled a switch, eh?”

At that instant, the spell was broken. Either that, or the men were purposely set free.

“Kill him!”

The second Smith shouted, he felt a burning-hot sensation pierce his chest. His feet dangled in the air.

The six-and-a-half-foot giant still impaled on his sword, D flipped around on his horse’s back, piercing the first man he encountered through the chest as well and easily lifting him off the ground.

A heartbeat later, the man’s back caught a hail of bullets from either side. Twitching madly in his death throes, the man expired. Smith’s body shook, too—he’d been struck by bullets that went clean through the other man. Using others as a shield. Two of them, at that, and impaled on his sword. There was no way to describe D’s strategy except callous, if not impossibly cruel.

As Smith jerked backward, taking one bullet after another as they passed through the first man, D looked at him. At his rictus. Its look of infinite hatred was trained on D.

“We have to make a break for it . . . but you’re not doing that. You idiot,” the Nobleman cried, “you’ll die here, too!”

“Go on ahead,” D replied. “I’ll follow along later. If I can, that is. You’d do well to wait for me.”

The baron didn’t know what to say to that.

“Besides me, there’s probably a lot of other people after you. Good luck.”

D’s left hand went for one of the grenades on Smith’s belt. When he pulled the pin out of it, Smith’s muddied eyes filled with incredible horror.

The shooting had stopped. The men on the rocky slopes had begun shifting into spots that would offer a clear shot at D.

“Stop . . . Are you trying . . . to blow me to bits?”

“Oh, looks like we’ve got a follower of the plains faith here,” the left hand said, sounding intrigued. “In which case, he believes he can’t move on to the next stage of existence if his body is left in more than ten pieces. I can see where that’d get him worked up.”

“Please, don’t do this . . . You can cut off my head . . . tear me limb from limb, even. Just . . . don’t blow me to pieces . . . Please . . .”

“Get on,” D ordered.

The baron had taken cover behind a rock a short distance away, but he dashed over and hopped up on the steed behind D.

The pin was out of the grenade. The striker inside it would hit the percussion cap and ignite the fuse. D had also activated the grenades on the corpse behind Smith.

A bullet whizzed by just above his head. It came from the side.

Apparently his foes had successfully repositioned themselves.

D's right hand went into action. He made a swipe of his sword—or rather, made the short, flicking movement of throwing a knife—and the impaled corpses slammed against the rocky hills to either side. Right in the middle of the men. By the time they'd realized his intent, his cyborg horse had broken into a gallop.

There was only the slightest difference in the timing of the explosions. As dirt and chunks of rock rained down, D raced through them. The baron, who had his arm wrapped around the Hunter's waist, continued to wail.

Once the road was clear of the rocky slopes, D halted his cyborg horse and looked back. Rough piles of stone from the embankments blocked the road, while the rumbling of the earth echoed far behind the rubble.

"So, you killed them all?" the baron murmured in a dumbstruck tone. "You're a bloodthirsty one, too, aren't you? It's a degenerate world we live in. Hey, what are you doing?"

D had wheeled his steed around and was now approaching a rocky slope. The reason soon became apparent. There was an opening between the ground and one of the massive crags. And a figure was trying to crawl out of it.

Getting down off his horse, D stood in front of the man. It was the first Smith. His face was strangely pale. At the toe of D's boots, he stopped moving. His bloodied body seemed to suddenly shrink.

"I'm begging you," he groaned at D's feet. "Get that Noble . . . to the . . . circuit court . . . Make him pay . . . for his sins . . ."

"What are you talking about?" shouted the baron, who'd come up behind D. "That was seven thousand years ago! The statute of limitations has already run out."

"Crimes . . . have no . . . expiration date . . ."

When Smith said that, bright blood spilled from his mouth. On seeing the unbelievable quantity that soaked the ground, the baron swallowed expectantly.

Smith's face turned upward. His eyes met D's. "I need you to do this . . . D." His voice was clear.

Smith's head dropped, and he moved no more.

"My fee will be paid by the court?" D asked, and then he said, "I see."

"Hey!" cried the baron, recoiling.

"Mount up," D said, pointing to the cyborg horse.

"You don't seriously intend to let one of your own kind be put on trial by humans, do you?"

D's firm lips broke for a moment. The expression *one of your own kind* had drawn a wry grin from him. "Well, it's a job."

"What do you *mean*? He'd already croaked. All that business about

your fee, you came up with on your own."

"That's one interpretation, I guess."

The baron was about to leap away when a stark flash of light zipped out. His Achilles tendon severed, the Nobleman fell to the ground and writhed in pain.

"You'll be good as new in five minutes." Looking down at the blubbering "one of his own kind," D gave a toss of his chin to the cyborg horse.

Once darkness had fallen, the cyborg horse picked up speed.

"Indeed, you really can't fight your blood, can you?" the baron jeered. D ignored him, but the Nobleman continued, undaunted. "Night rather than day—this is best for every course of action. But one thing has amazed me. You don't sleep by day, so when do you rest? The average dhampir could never manage this. You really must be *his*—"

There he shut his mouth and gave a grunt of admiration.

"He never gives that mouth a rest, does he?" whispered the fist that gripped the reins. "What do you say to strangling him before we get to Zappara?"

"What are you mumbling about?" the baron snapped. "Talking to yourself is one of the warning signs of madness. Talk to *me*. No, you needn't talk at all. I'll tell you about the Sacred Ancestor. Okay, first of all, he stands six and a half feet tall—what's that?"

Whatever the baron had perceived, D, too, sensed it. Two pairs of eyes pierced the darkness ahead.

"Why, it's a kid."

A small figure seated by the side of the road had come into view. It was a boy around ten years old. Though he wore a shirt and pants so filthy the dirt was evident even at night, there was a certain determined look to his features. When the riders had closed to within ten yards of him, the boy noticed them and got to his feet, then jogged over to them.

"Please, help!" he cried, looking up at them.

The cyborg horse went right past him. Even a boy seeking help in the darkness of night was nothing to D.

The boy followed after them. Even through the darkness, the desperation of his expression was clear.

"Hey, what's wrong?" the baron called out to him. Not because he was concerned. He was merely curious.

"We were on our way to the Capital to work when my sister went missing somewhere around here. Please help me find her!"

"Oh, my, that is quite a predicament you're in. Hey, D, aren't you going to help him out?"

Of course, the Nobleman didn't mean what he said. And knowing that, D rode on in silence.

"Oh, I feel sorry for you. Poor little kid! This fellow here, you see,

doesn't care a whit whether anyone else lives or dies. So sad. Farewell!"

There was no one there to reprimand the baron as he cackled and waved goodbye, but suddenly a female scream was heard, drawing a little shriek from the Nobleman. The scream didn't come from the forest. It came from above.

D's right hand shot up. A single glint of reflected moonlight zipped up in the air.

Gasping, the baron turned around, and at that instant, not ten feet up ahead, a girl landed on the ground with an unpleasant thud.

After a brief silence, the stunned boy said, "Sis?" and broke into a run.

"What in the—"

The baron never got the chance to finish that rhetorical question.

D's left hand reached over his head. A silver arc shot up into the moonlight.

An indescribable cry shook the night air: a scream of agony. His second wooden needle hadn't missed its mark. As the cries of its victim's pained convulsions echoed, the baron heard the clamor dwindling in the distance.

"You did it! It's gone. Won't be showing itself again, eh?" the baron chortled. His expression soon grew deadly serious. "But, I say, I had no idea such strange monstrosities had proliferated while I slumbered. How rude. What in the—"

As the Nobleman was grumbling, D had gotten down off the horse. He walked over to the two children without making a sound.

The boy had already run over to the girl. Truly a child of the Frontier, he didn't grab and shake his sister, but rather merely called to her. "Sis, what's wrong? It wasn't supposed to be this way. You've gotta be strong, and get up!"

The girl lay there utterly motionless, like a doll, as black-gloved hands reached out and lifted her up. The boy's eyes might have caught the bizarre thing in D's left hand as the five fingers spread. The girl was dressed in a filthy shirt and shorts just like the boy, and D ran his hand over her head, neck, chest, hips, legs, and toes before saying, "She's alive."

He wasn't addressing the boy. He'd merely confirmed it for himself. Nonetheless, the boy's eyes gleamed with wonder.

"Really? But she fell so far—"

"No internal or external injuries. Was she being protected?"

"By what?" The boy's wide eyes gazed at D, then immediately shifted to the skies above.

"Tonight, we'll just let her sleep through the night," D said, then told the baron up on the horse, "We'll take a break until morning."

"Oh, now this is interesting. You seem so stalwart, but you're really quite a soft man. Have a weakness for kids' tears, do you?"

“Amen to that,” the hoarse voice agreed.

“That thing was a ‘human taker’ made by the Nobility. It evolved further on its own,” D said.

“What are you getting at? I don’t recall ever making anything as disgusting as that,” the baron protested.

“In your time, human takers were already in use. I’ve heard every last Noble worked on coming up with machines to abduct humans. It’s not all that surprising there’s something like that around.”

III

The group went into the depths of the forest—back to the clearing where the boy and his sister had made their camp. The wreckage of a wagon and a cyborg horse lay there.

Turning in the direction in which the creature had vanished, the Hunter said, “We’re dealing with one of the Nobility’s machines here. It may come back.” Facing the boy, he then asked, “Do you want to hire me?”

Without even a moment’s thought, the boy nodded. “But—what’ll I do for money?” he asked, turning his eyes toward the ground.

“How much do you have?”

“I’ve got fifty dalen, and my sister’s got about two dalas.”

There were a hundred dalen to one dala.

The boy raised his face. He shouted, “But if you take it all, we’ll—”

“You’ll earn more. It beats dying, doesn’t it?”

The boy had nothing to say to that.

“You’ve got ice water in your veins,” the baron said, snorting in utter contempt.

“Sure does,” a voice said to him, causing him to look all around once again. The baron seemed rather dim.

Ultimately, the boy agreed. He was more concerned about his sister, now wrapped in a sleeping bag D had provided, than in arguing about money.

“I’m D,” the Hunter told his employer.

Smiling, the boy said, “I’m Piron. My sister’s Leda.”

Watching them with a gloomy look in his eye, the baron remarked condescendingly, “Isn’t this a heartwarming reconciliation. But, D, were these ‘human takers’ really as prevalent as you say they were? I don’t know anything about them!”

“Where were you back in those days?”

“Where else would I be? I spent three hundred and sixty-five days a year focused on research, never setting foot outside my castle. Why, in those days, I once went a record three years without sleep or rest. And of the times I holed up in my castle, the longest was for a period of three centuries. Ha, ha, ha!” After about ten seconds of boastful laughter, he

noticed that D didn't seem impressed. "But my goal was a lofty one. I can't imagine any other Nobles ever undertaking anything similar. What did they use those things for?"

"Sport."

"Why'd your voice change all of a sudden? Are you a master of mimicry or something?"

"Your fellow Nobility took the captured humans and transformed them into various creatures. Humans combined with lions, humans with fire dragons, humans with snakes—they made every last thing your moldering brains could imagine. And if that wasn't enough for them, your kind performed vivisections on men and women, young and old, just to pass the time."

"What stupidity!" the baron spat. In a doleful tone he continued, "There's no more interesting research specimen in all the world than human beings. You say they used them as the basis for chimera, or chopped them to pieces like dolls? The idiots! *He* was right about them all along."

"*He?*" D said softly, looking at the diminutive figure.

"That's right. *Him*. He said the Nobility were not long for this world. And he was exactly right. Who *needs* the damned Nobility?"

"Do you really feel that way?"

"Stop changing your voice back and forth, would you? Do you make a hobby of spooking old people, you creep?"

"Are you serious?" D asked, a quiet light in his eyes.

The baron suddenly grew flustered, saying, "I sure am. I'm all the Nobility this world needs. The rest of them are just in the way, so let 'em turn to dust. The next time we run across a Noble's grave, I'll tear the thing apart! Let 'em have a baptism of sunlight," he cackled.

The people he cursed were his own kind. The flames of the campfire threw shadows on his round face and bald head that were exceedingly disturbing. Looking as if he were about to cry, the boy—Piron—inched closer to D.

"He's sick, that one is," the hoarse voice whispered.

"Where are you from?" D asked. Piron was his employer. A certain amount of conversation was required.

"The village of Kibiaji. About four months back, our mother and father died in an accident, so Sis and I were going to the Capital to work."

"Do you know anyone there?"

"We heard our mother had a much older sister there."

"Oh, you poor little things," the cackling baron said, a disagreeable grin rising on his face. "How would you like to be part of my experiments? I guarantee your older sister will be taken care of for life."

Something whizzed by his nose.

"Oww!"

Jumping to his feet, the baron clutched the end of his nose, the blood seeping between his fingers lent a crimson hue by the flames.

As D sheathed his blade with a clink, the boy stared at him in amazement. Apparently he'd thought D and the baron were compatriots.

"I have to warn you: he's a Noble," the hoarse voice said.

Eyes bulging, the boy looked at the baron and D. There were the two of them, plus that hoarse voice. It came as little surprise he was confused.

"I'm a Hunter. I'm taking this Noble to Zappara. There should be scheduled flights to the Capital from there. You can catch one of those."

Nodding, the boy said, "That Noble is a bad guy, isn't he?"

"Yes, from the human point of view."

"Is the Noble point of view any different?"

"That's a good question."

"Don't the Nobility have any bad guys?"

"I'm sure there probably are."

"Well, how about good guys?"

"There are probably those, too."

The boy's expression changed. He'd caught a strange timbre to D's voice. The Hunter sounded happy.

From a short distance away, the baron laughed mockingly. "What a fanciful load of tripe. You think there's good or bad Nobility? Nobles are Nobles—they're all one and the same beast."

With the coming of dawn, the group set out. During the night, D had used branches and slim tree trunks to fashion a sled, which Piron and Leda now rode on.

"You're quite the handyman," the baron remarked in a tone dripping with venom.

For a while, Piron continued to stare at the baron in mute surprise. He couldn't believe there was a Noble who could be out in daylight.

"What are you staring at? Haven't you ever seen a Noble before?"

"No."

"Hmm, I suppose you haven't, have you?" the baron said, unamused.

"You're moving around in daylight, and you're a Noble?"

"What's wrong with me moving around? I'm special. A unique specimen singled out from all the Nobility. I'll thank you not to lump me in with all those other idiots."

"Who singled you out?"

The baron fell silent.

"Stay just as you are," D ordered sharply.

Both Piron and the baron saw his left hand rise into the air.

"That same bastard from last night?"

The baron bugged his eyes at that hoarse remark, while Piron tensed even more.

At some point, the land to either side of them had become vast plains. D turned around. The forest was no longer visible.

"Lie down on the ground," D said.

"What's this all about?"

The baron's eyes followed D's left hand, and his pudgy face suddenly paled. At the same time, a black shadow fell across them. The blue sky's sunlight had suddenly changed to darkness. But there weren't any clouds. To be precise, it wasn't actually darkness. The road and the plains, the distant rocky mountains and forest could all still be clearly discerned. But there was no way to describe it except to say the whole sky had suddenly seemed to cloud over. And everyone knew the reason.

A single streak of blue light connected the sky to the distant plain. The light rippled across the ground's surface like waves. Without a second's respite, a streak of black vividly linked heaven and earth. In an instant, it was pulled back into the heavens. In its wake, an enormous crater remained.

"It's a lightning sucker. Stay under this."

A blue cloth fell over the group. It was a blanket from the saddlebags on the Hunter's cyborg horse. Almost completely resistant to fire, water, cold, and heat, it was just one example of an item that took advantage of the Nobility's technology. It was also resistant to electricity. It was the great rise in travel to the Frontier some eight millennia earlier that'd provided the impetus to develop this sort of blanket.

"What, you're not getting under it, too?" the baron asked, his face poking out from under the blanket, looking at where D lay on the ground beside his steed. His face was tinged with blue light. This time the bizarre streak stretched out, and there was a flash of lightning in a spot several miles away.

The term "lightning sucker" was used to refer to something that lurked in the sky. No one had ever actually seen one, and it was known only by its savage manner of eating. First, darkness would spread across the sky, electrical shocks would flash, and then a colossal tube would suck up all the living creatures on the ground.

Just look. From far off in the distance, the long, thick tube had closed to within six miles of D and his group. The tube of dark red flesh that sucked all the electrocuted creatures a good six miles up into the darkened sky had to be at least fifty yards in diameter. Against something on that scale, a shockproof blanket seemed like it'd be about as useful as a wet tissue. But D had chosen to use it because of a strange habit the lightning sucker had.

"You intended to take the thing's electrical shocks without any protection? Even a Noble couldn't withstand that. It'll make a corpse of you and suck you up!"

The lightning sucker first blanketed the ground with electrical shocks to exterminate the living creatures, then sucked them up with its

enormous tube. As it did so, any creature that still drew breath was ignored. How it told the living from the dead was a mystery, when it sucked everything up with such force it carved great craters in the earth.

Its electrical shocks ran as high as fifty million volts. There was some question of whether the blanket could take that much, to say nothing of D out in the open.

The air turned blue.

"Here it comes!"

At D's cry, the baron gave a squeal and pulled the blanket back over his head. The blanket, D, and the plains were all tinged blue.

"Ah, I'm going numb!" the baron shrieked under the blanket.

"And you call yourself a Noble," Piron growled. Ordinarily, he should've been afraid of the Noble even if D was there with him, but this boy not only wasn't troubled by the baron; he actually mocked him. Though the boy's personality may have played some part, surely the baron's display of cowardice was to blame.

"What are you talking about, you little bastard? Once D out there's been sucked up, I'll drain the blood from you and your sister."

"Screw you! Go ahead and try it, if you like. I'll drive a wooden stake through your heart before you get that far."

"N-now you've gone and said it!" the baron sputtered.

"Yeah, I did. You bastard scumbag piece of trash!"

"Why, you little—"

The Nobleman was just about to pounce on the boy when D's voice was heard beyond the blanket. "Direct hit incoming."

"*What?*"

Even the inside of the blanket was tinged blue.

"Gaaaaaaah!" the baron shrieked, writhing. Electromagnetic waves had passed through, conducted by the metallic ornaments he wore. "Help me!" he cried, trying to latch onto Piron.

"Keep back!" the boy said, planting a kick of his youthful foot square in the middle of the baron's face. The numbness assailed Piron, too. The boy, and his older sister as well, twitched violently.

A blue fog rolled out. No, not fog, but rather smoke. Under the ferocious electrical assault, the blanket had begun to burn.

"Oh, no! We'll be burnt to a crisp! Heeeeelp!"

The electromagnetic waves were coursing through his body, the fire was scorching him, and he was suffocating from the smoke. Suffering from a triple threat beyond imagining, the baron finally threw the blanket off.

"Huh?"

Light had returned to the world. Though various spots on the plains had enormous, fifty-foot-wide holes, the lightning sucker had apparently left.

"Oh, that's right—what about D?"

The cyborg horse still lay on its side, and the baron looked beside it. He swallowed so hard, Piron got his coughing under control and poked his head up, asking, “What is it?”

There wasn’t a trace of D.

ALL GONE

chapter 6

I

Out in the middle of the plains, the baron and Piron were stunned. Searching their surroundings, they found no sign of D. It was certain. He'd been swallowed up by the lightning sucker's tube.

"In which case he's dead, right?" the baron murmured in amazement, while beside him Piron took the cyborg horse by the reins and pulled it up. "What do you think you're doing?"

Piron flatly told the dubious baron, "There's no point standing around reflecting on a dead man. Now, get us to Zappara, just as agreed."

"Idiot. I'll have nothing more to do with the two of you," the baron sneered. And with that he grinned from ear to ear. "I'm free now. Free! Now no one can stand in my way. Even if *ten* millennia had passed, I'd still have things I need to do. Ah, that's right. Very well, if you'll help me with my work, I'll bring the two of you with me."

"Not a chance."

"What?"

"You think we'd hang around with a Noble? Especially a creepy little one who can move around in the daylight? So long, sucker!" the boy said in a forceful tone that made him sound like someone else altogether —and the speed with which he jumped onto the back of the cyborg horse was likewise that of a different person.

"No, wait!"

Before the baron could reach out for him, the boy delivered a kick to the steed, the rope tethered to the sled carrying his sister pulled taut, and the cyborg horse began to gallop across the earth with terrific speed.

"Wait. At least leave me my bag!"

The baron chased after the dwindling figure for two or three steps before halting and beginning to stomp his feet with anger.

"Wait! Come back, you little brat! I'm a Noble! A human would presume to leave a Noble behind? Damn you! I curse you till the end of your days. The next time I see you and your sister, I'll drain you of every last drop of your lowly blood!"

By the time he'd finished shouting, the horse and sled had shrunk to the size of a pea far down the highway.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shiiiiiiiit!"

When he was finally done stomping his feet, the baron took a seat in the middle of the road and looked up. The sun continued to shine down

radiantly on him, all alone.

"Stupid sun! Don't you know how to do anything besides shine?"

After that complaint, the baron rested his hand against his cheek and began to think. "Good enough," he murmured a few seconds later. "Guess there's no way around it. Off I go."

Rising with a cry of "upsy-daisy," he waddled off in the same direction Piron had ridden.

"What's this?" the baron cried after he'd gone about three miles, squinting his eyes.

The tiny figure and the object he'd seen some way off had turned out to be the boy and the sled. Apparently the boy had noticed him as well, but he made no attempt to run off, remaining sitting by the roadside instead.

"You little bastard. I'm going to suck the life right out of you!" the Nobleman declared, but by the time he reached Piron and the sled he was dripping with sweat and panting for breath.

"Oh, sir!" Piron cried out, throwing himself at the baron's chest and causing the Noble's head to spin. He would've knocked the boy away, but such strength no longer remained in his limbs. If anyone had been there to witness it, they'd probably have taken it for a joyous reunion between an old man and his grandson.

"Why in blazes are you acting so oddly?" the baron asked, still gasping for air. "And the horse—what happened to the horse?"

"I got this far, and then a great cat crossed the road right in front of me. The horse was so startled it threw me right off and bolted. It was all I could do to get the rope to the sled undone!"

"You brought this on yourself, you dolt!"

"Help us, sir."

"Are you kidding me, you little traitor? I'll leave your miserable hide to die out here. Why should I care what happens to you?"

"Pleeeeeease, sir."

"Don't try sucking up to me, you damned louse," he shot back indignantly.

But right by the Noble's ear, a voice said, "Oh, don't say such things." The sweet whisper was clearly that of a woman.

Turning, the baron gasped. "Why, you're—"

"I'm his big sister, Leda."

Getting up off the sled, the girl wrapped her pale arms around the baron's neck and pulled him close. When her warm, soft cheek brushed against his, the baron was in heaven.

"Wh-what are you doing? Are you some kind of nympho?"

"Oh, my. That's just a greeting. It means we're counting on you."

Leda smiled. She couldn't have been five years older than Piron. Though she appeared to be fourteen or fifteen, the blush of her cheeks,

the look in her eye, and the way her lips had parted ever so slightly were all quite alluring. An old man with a Lolita complex would've fallen head over heels for her at one glance.

However, the baron twisted himself around, pulling free of her pale arms.

"Dear me!"

"What do you mean, 'dear me'? And don't look at me that way. What's a little girl like you doing coming on to me that way? I've used countless kids your age in my experiments. Every last one of them screamed and cried. What's that to me? You don't seem frightened at all. I guarantee you this—I'll use the both of you in my experiments before I'm done."

"Oh, but you can't use us in them if you don't take us with you. Isn't that right, Piron?" Leda said, gazing at the baron as she fixed her hair. It was a sidelong glance.

"Yeah, that's right. Let's go," Piron said, linking arms with the baron.

Shaking free of him, the Nobleman said, "Pipe down, you two little deviants. How did you even wake up in the first place?"

"We were attacked by a lightning sucker, right? It was the electrical shock from that."

"Hmph! It'd been better if you'd died of electrocution."

"Oh, don't say such heartless things!"

"At any rate, I'm going. If I stay out here in the sun, I'll dry right out," the baron declared resolutely.

"Aren't the Nobility indestructible?" Leda asked, the smile never leaving her face.

Disgusted, the baron replied, "Like I said, I can walk in the light of the sun. In return, my innate Noble powers have been unavoidably reduced. Alas!"

"But you won't die, will you?"

"No. I shouldn't, at least. However, if this state were to continue, death would be preferable. I believe I understand now why some might take their lives."

"Wow, you mean even Nobles hang themselves?"

"They don't *hang* themselves. They cut their heads right off! *Ker-chop!*"

Seeing the baron make a horizontal chop with his hand, the boy said, "Oh, so that really does it?"

The methods of slaying a Noble were well known throughout the populace, but there were few who'd ever had an opportunity to put them to the test. They remained mere speculation. Cut off the head, drive a stake through the heart, submerge in running water, burn with fire—those were the accepted methods, but there were also some childishly ridiculous ones, like feeding Nobles sweets until it killed them, or standing next to a coffin for three days, screaming insults.

“Be quiet, you. Don’t concern yourself with such trivia. Humans should prostrate themselves before the Nobility. And the two of you can remain here forever.”

Perhaps some of the Nobleman’s strength had returned, because he waddled off again with his reclaimed leather satchel in hand. Then his movements stopped dead. When he turned around, his face wore an evil grin he couldn’t conceal.

“On further consideration, it would be too cruel to leave two young children out here on this forsaken highway. Very well, then. Follow me. I’ll see you safely to human habitation.”

“Really?” Leda threw her arms around the baron’s neck and began showering him with kisses.

However, if she could’ve seen the words inscribed in his heart at that very moment, her reaction would have been very different.

Oh, I could leave you two to a terrible fate. However, you can both be of far greater use to me. Noble or not, I get hungry and thirsty. And when I do, your blood will be my lifeline.

And so the three of them began walking, each with their own ideas.

After a while, the baron inquired, “What are you looking at?” For he felt the two of them needling him from head to toe with their gazes.

“That sure is some finery you’re wearing,” Leda said indifferently.

The clothes beneath his cape were covered with copious amounts of gold embroidery and trim and set with jewels that gave off a blinding gleam. Obviously, there were bracelets and pendants. Regardless of the value of the man wearing it, the outfit must’ve been worth more than a hundred million dalas.

“Children shouldn’t have an interest in such things. For a Noble, attire of this sort is only meet.”

“But you’re special, sir. You’re so charming, and I’ve never seen a man wearing soooo many of these things.”

“My, but you have good taste for a little kid,” the baron remarked, grinning like an idiot. “That’s exactly right. I, the great Baron Macula, am not quite like the countrified Nobility you find scattered about. The gold and jewels they use to adorn themselves are all synthesized, while mine are all completely natural, formed from the very elements by Mother Nature and brought to the surface by the miracle of geological shifts. What I wear at present alone would fetch a good five hundred billion dalas.”

“Wealthy men are simply the best!”

“Girl, you have a way with words,” the baron said, finally beginning to smile. Neither the girl nor the boy noticed that as he stared at them, his eyes were as cold as iron.

That night, they camped out. Though they were in the middle of the plains, the boy and girl somehow managed to gather some dead branches.

As he watched the flames, Piron murmured apprehensively, “I wonder if any beasts will come around.”

Leda gazed at the baron with cold eyes. Not that she was sizing up whether or not he was reliable—her gaze was focused on the baron’s jewels as they glittered with the light of the flames. Suddenly grinning from ear to ear, she said in a sweet tone, “It’s okay, Piron. We have the good baron here with us.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the baron instantly replied. “Why would I save your little brother? If some strange beastie were to gobble him up, it’d be one less thing to worry about and make my journey all the easier. And once he’d been devoured, I’d do away with the thing that ate him, leaving twice as much for you to eat.”

“Please, don’t say such things,” Leda said, snuggling closer to the Nobleman.

He immediately went soft on her, showing that even Nobles could be embarrassingly stupid. “Leave it to me. As long as Baron Macula is here, nothing will lay so much as a finger on you.”

He rapped his fist against his chest.

As if in response, there was a groan in the darkness off to their right.

“Eh?” the baron exclaimed, turning toward the sound. Every hair on his body instantly stood on end. Not an iota of his tough talk remained. “Just a moment—I must go attend to matters.”

Getting to his feet, the baron walked off a short distance, then put his hands against the ground. Down on all fours, he started to wriggle away.

“Sis, he means to take off on us!”

In response to Piron’s remark, Leda said, “That groan was a ‘walker.’ Hold your breath, and don’t think about anything.”

The two froze in place, as if they were stone.

Some fifty yards from the fire, the baron halted. An inhumanly sweet female voice had whispered in his ear, “Please, wait.”

Could that be Leda? he thought, but he immediately realized it wasn’t. Any question about when she might’ve followed him was whisked aside the second he heard that voice.

The Noble’s eyes reflected the darkness, as well as the thing that’d halted before him. It lacked eyes, a nose, and a mouth. It was a sphere about six feet in diameter. *A mass of transparent liquid*, the Nobleman’s eyes told him.

At that instant, the mass rolled over, swallowing the baron.

A single streak of light struck the watery mass. A terrific cloud of

steam rose from it, obscuring the moon and stars. It was about five seconds later that the baron plopped down on the ground like a drowned rat. Aside from the foggy vapor, no trace of the watery mass remained.

A pair of figures raced over to the coughing, sputtering baron.

"Nothing will lay so much as a finger on us, eh? What a disappointment."

Naturally it was Piron who spat that remark, while Leda switched off the heat beam emitter concealed in her ring and ran over, crying, "Baron?"

"I'm melting! It's burning me!" the baron shouted as if delirious, his hands and face shrouded in steam, and his skin coming apart like a stack of waterlogged papers. It was clear that he'd been exposed to strong acid.

"His clothes and precious metals have dissolved. It's no use now. Let's just leave him and be on our way, Sis."

"What are you talking about?" Leda said reproachfully, winking one eye at her brother. "We can't leave the good baron wounded like this. I'll see to it he has the loving care he needs."

"Are you stupid or something, Sis?" Piron snarled at her. "He's a Noble. No matter what happens to him, so long as he doesn't get a stake driven through his heart, he'll come back to life. He doesn't need any care!"

"You're the one who's stupid!" As Leda gently stroked the peeling skin of the baron's cheek, she whispered to her brother, "That's why it'd be dangerous to just leave him here. If we run into him again somewhere, he'll have his vengeance on us. Nothing works better on guys like him than lies and sweet talk."

"You think it's that easy to work human psychology on him? He might be short and bald, but he's a Noble."

"But the shape is exactly the same. And their heads work the same way, too. I'll manage something."

"Sheesh! Do what you like, then."

However, contrary to what the children had believed, the baron showed no improvement. As the night stretched on, his tattered flesh began to give off a repulsive stench. The smell of putrefaction. Even his groans of "Ooooh!" and "Aaaaah!" clearly worsened, becoming a constant "Ugggggggnnnnn!"

The two of them exchanged glances.

"I guess it's like you said after all." Leda had a dangerous gleam in her eye. "Nobles are supposed to get better at night, but just look at him now. We've done all we can. Come morning, let's just leave him and go," said the girl.

At that, the boy objected, saying, "But I feel kinda bad for him."

"Why?"

“Well, he’s really in pain. He’s a weird Noble. Pretty close to human.”

“Doesn’t that make him all that much creepier, then? We’d do well to take what we can and hit the road. If he’s going to up and die on us, we’ll be home free!”

“Gaaaaaaaah!”

Something white spilled from the baron’s mouth, running down his cheeks and neck.

“He’s as good as finished now,” Leda said, shaking her brother’s shoulder and getting to her feet. From the pile of branches they’d collected to fuel the fire she chose a relatively straight piece of wood and handed it to Piron.

The flames colored the boy’s cheeks. His face was terribly devoid of emotion. He gazed at one end of the dead branch. It came to a sharp point.

“Hurry,” Leda whispered.

The boy nodded. His features hardened in a look of determination. The flames danced in his eyes.

Having risen high in the sky, the sun shone down starkly on the highway the boy and girl traveled.

Piron halted. He was utterly exhausted.

Having walked since early morning without saying a word, his older sister also stopped, glaring at her brother with eyes ablaze with anger. “You really are stupid, you know that? You’re groggy already, right? We’ve got nothing to eat, and I don’t think anyone’s going to pass this way—what are we supposed to do?”

“It can’t be helped. We’ve got one extra.”

As he said that, Piron slumped to the ground. The shock traveled up his back, and the pitiful figure he carried on it let out a feeble groan.

The baron still lived.

“Well, you had to go and show an odd sense of honor. Now we’re beat, and we didn’t even get half as far as we’d planned. Okay, how about we finish him off here?”

Once again the girl held out the branch she carried.

Though Piron looked at it longingly, his gaze soon became one of fierce refusal.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t want to. I can’t do that to someone who’s in pain.”

“He’s a Noble!”

“He looks just like us. I can’t do it!”

Leda glared at her brother for a while, then nodded. Jerking the branch back, she said, “Fine, I’ll do it,” and raised the pointed stick high.

"Don't!" Piron cried, grabbing his sister's hand.

"Why are you trying to act like such a big man?" Leda shouted at him as they struggled. "It's all the Nobility's fault that the two of us have to live like this. We could destroy 'em all and take their treasure and no one would ever say a damned thing about it!"

"But if we went and stabbed someone in pain, we'd be just like the Nobility! Let's just swipe his stuff! Okay?"

"And what are we supposed to do if he gets better and comes after us? He could tear us to pieces like nothing. We've gotta nip that in the bud."

"At any rate, just don't do it."

"Shut your mouth!"

"Shut up!"

Still struggling, the siblings froze.

Who'd just said, "Shut up"?

Two sets of eyes found a common focus at the siblings' feet.

A burnt, swollen face was looking up at them disagreeably.

"You, you're, er, you're awake?" Leda said, smiling awkwardly.

"Yeah, I haven't slept a wink since last night."

"Um . . . You know, I . . . Well, I was just joking."

As Leda tried to explain, she casually brought the opening of her laser ring to bear on the baron.

"Save your pathetic little toy for the beasts," the baron said with disgust, dismissing the threat with a wave of one hand. "Enough about that. Don't you two see anything?"

"Huh?" they exclaimed in concert, looking all around them.

"Down the road that way . . . I saw buildings . . . Probably a town. Stick with it until you get that far. There's maybe another three miles."

Though the other two strained their eyes, they couldn't make out any buildings, let alone people.

Somewhat suspicious, Piron asked, "Have you been conning us?"

Suddenly, the Noble cried, "Ugggggnnnnn!" He flailed his limbs like a frog.

"You must be shitting me, you bald little Nobleman—walk on your own damned feet!" the boy shouted, delivering a well-placed kick to the baron.

"Little bastard," the baron grumbled as he got up.

Leda quickly squatted down in front of him, turning her back to him and saying, "My dear baron, I'll carry you if my brother won't."

"Shut up, you two-faced bitch. I'll never believe another word you say. And sooner or later I'll drink your blood; mark my words."

"That hurts me," Leda said, sniffling. It really was something to see. She was a born actress.

"Okay, let's go," Piron said with a displeased look on his face, tossing his chin at the road ahead. "And baldy, if you're lying about that town,

I'll stake you."

III

There was a town.

The siblings' faces brimmed with pleasure, but it soon changed to suspicion. Once they reached the edge of town, that was transformed into despair. Thunder could be heard rumbling in the distance. Rain was coming. It was just another weight on the siblings' chests.

"That's weird," Piron groaned.

There wasn't a man, woman, or child on the streets. Every town had its idle old folks sitting out in chairs facing the street, but there were none to be seen here. Yet a clamorous performance could be heard from the saloon. As the trio stood rooted and dumbfounded, streaks of white angled through their field of view.

"If it's not one thing, it's another—now we've got rain," Leda remarked apathetically.

On the right-hand side of the street there stood a two-story hotel. As the trio bounded through the door, they were followed by the sound of rain.

"Funny," Piron said, craning his neck.

There was a lobby next to the front desk. The tables in the adjacent lounge were covered with cups of coffee and half-eaten meals that still gave off enticing aromas. However, there was no one there.

Waddling over to one of the tables, the baron picked up a cigar that rested in an ashtray. Putting it to his lips, he blew out a puff of purplish smoke and said, "That's a cheap one."

"Oh, shut up!" Piron snarled, showing his teeth. He was still angry that he'd carried the Nobleman on his back when the baron could've walked on his own.

"But judging from the way that cigar's still burning, there were people here about ten minutes ago."

Leda's comment drew a nod from the baron, who touched his finger to a steak. "It's still warm. I'd say five, maybe six minutes ago. Oh, someone dropped a cigarette over there and it's still burning. That's not good. Only you can prevent fires!"

Quickly waddling over, he stomped it out. He looked less like a baron and more like a gaudily attired bellhop. Cigarettes had been dropped in five places.

"There are knives and forks on the floor, too. What could've happened, Sis?"

"Don't ask me; ask the good baron. Dear me! He's gone!"

"Ran off, did you, you bald shrimp!"

Piron looked around, and then the door to the lounge opened and the baron appeared.

"What the hell were you doing?"

"Preventing fires—there was food cooking in the kitchen. The place was *that close* to going up in flames."

"Leave it to the good baron! You're so much more perceptive than the two of us."

"Of course," the baron said, puffing his chest—or rather, falling over backward. For it was at that moment that the door was blown off, followed by a roar and a shock wave.

Having narrowly managed to hit the floor, the siblings were spared the force of the blast by a toppled table, and a battered but pudgy face appeared between them.

"What the hell was that you said about preventing fires?"

Piron was too angry to say any more, but the baron rubbed the top of the boy's head.

"What kind of sorry excuse for a spell are you trying to put on me?" Piron snapped.

"Just trying to ingratiate myself," the baron replied. "It would seem I forgot to turn off a gas range. Well, no matter. We're safe now. Let's decide where our quarters will be!"

"But the place is on fire. Aren't we gonna put it out?"

"That can't be helped. Let the rain take care of it."

"You lazy Noble bastard—where are we supposed to sleep?"

"Any place with a roof will suffice," the baron said, getting up and hastening to the foyer.

The next building the trio entered was the sheriff's office. There wasn't a soul there, either.

Walking about the room, the Nobleman said, "The cigarette butt in the ashtray is fresh. Maybe the sheriff simply stepped out on his rounds. But judging from the way the jail is locked up, someone must've been in the cells. In short, this is how I see it: Up until five or six minutes before our arrival, this town was going about its business like normal. However, for some reason, every person in town vanished."

"Impossible—there's probably someone around. I'll call out and see," said the girl.

"I wouldn't do that. What if whatever got rid of all of them gets wise to us?"

"But—"

"Wait until we know what we're dealing with here."

"How are we supposed to find that out?"

"How should I know?"

The baron's flippant answer made Leda explode in anger. "I'm going to go see about this!" she shouted, spinning around, but the baron took a step forward and grabbed her by the back of her collar.

"It's raining. You'll catch a cold. Oh, I know what we can do. Get

some of those weapons over there and get ready to stand guard. I'll go look for some food or something."

This time it was Leda's turn to grab him by the back of the collar. "I'm not letting you get away, my dear baron. We'll stick together at all times!"

"Unhand me, damn you! Let me go! Don't you care at all about how I feel?"

"Not a bit," Piron said, shaking his head—then he picked up a chair and smashed it against the glass front of the weapons case. Avoiding the flying glass, he pulled out a firearm. As a rifle would've been a bit much for him to handle, he chose a pistol. Still, it was disproportionately large for a ten-year-old boy.

"What, are you an idiot or something, making a racket like that!" the baron shouted. "You'll bring the damned thing down on us, you little shit!"

The boy and the girl looked at each other, then shouted at the baron in unison, "The damned thing? You know what it is!"

"Shut up!" the baron snapped back, trying to keep his voice low.

Pulling Leda's hand off of him, he dashed over to the door. As he peeked outside, his face fell. That same dismal mood infected the siblings, keeping them motionless. A minute passed.

After a good, long look, the baron turned around. "Okay, we're safe for the time being. Use this chance to go find some food. The general store's over there."

"I thought you were going?"

"I'm afraid not," the baron said, barreling through the doors. After swinging wide, they swallowed the chubby figure.

"Wait," Piron called out, gun at the ready.

But Leda scolded him, saying, "He was right—you can't be making noise like that!"

"But the little baldy—"

"Forget about him. He needs our blood. He'll be back soon enough. So forget it, and let's go find some food, just like he said. I'm starving."

Fortunately, the merchandise in the general store was unaffected. With all the canned goods, instant food, and drinking water they could carry, the two of them returned to the sheriff's office.

With the coming of night, the rain grew more intense, and it was joined by wind. The baron, of course, hadn't returned. They turned out the lights and used a candle that was in the office instead out of fear of the unknown threat. It seemed impossible to believe the baron's terror had been feigned.

Suddenly, the world was aglow with white. The ears of the astonished pair caught a rumble. Thunder.

"I wonder if that lightning struck very close to here."

"I don't know why, but I just hope it goes in *that* direction."

She must've meant in the direction of the thing the baron had mentioned. Piron nodded as well, in spite of himself.

On and on went the hours of wind and rain. It was nearly midnight now. Though the two of them were in no position to be sleeping, they could feel the sandman prodding at their brains. Suddenly, Piron opened his eyes. At the same time, his sister looked at him.

"Sis, the little baldy appeared to me in a dream!"

"Me, too. And he said—"

"—to hurry up and get out of here!"

They stared at each other in astonishment.

Shaking her head, Leda got up and headed for the door.

The street was strangely bright. The lights were on in the arcade that covered the sidewalks. Whatever had taken all the people didn't appear to have any interest in electricity.

Leda peeked out the window that was set high in the door. Once she'd checked straight across from them, she shifted to the left to see down the right side, then to the right for a look down the left.

"Ah," she gasped, her tone rather dazed.

It took Piron about two seconds to notice the change in her. Racing to his sister's side, he looked in the same direction. And immediately understood.

The street felt strangely short.

And then, the light furthest down the street suddenly disappeared. It hadn't been switched off. It'd been swallowed by the darkness.

"Sis—the darkness is coming this way!" the boy shouted in amazement as a black, heaven-and-earth-engulfing shape approached, swallowing everything in its path.

"Run for it, Piron!" Leda cried out, her body quivering. "They were all swallowed up by that thing!"

"That thing—what *is* it?"

"I don't know. Let's get out of here already!"

Once Piron had grabbed a pistol, the two of them bolted outside. Though the wind and rain lashed every inch of them, they paid no heed. They turned toward *it*. The darkness had already closed to within five yards!

Not needing to say anything, they broke into a run in unison, but Piron didn't get two paces before he tripped and fell.

"Piron?"

"Run for it, Sis!"

His scream of despair was bleached white. The siblings shut their eyes because the stark light burned them—and also from terror.

Nothing happened.

The siblings opened their eyes. A figure in black cut through their white-hot field of view.

“D?”

Before him lurked the darkness. Perhaps it was mesmerized by the beauty of the figure standing before it with sword ready, or perhaps it was frightened by the ghastly aura that emanated from every inch of his body. The man who’d been swallowed by the lightning sucker had returned with a flash of lightning. He stepped forward. The darkness backed away. His blade danced out.

The two of them saw the darkness split apart. Piron gasped.

The darkness spread all around the cut, melding together to restore the blackness. A heartbeat later, it lunged at the gorgeous young man like a wild animal.

TOMORROW'S POSSIBILITY

chapter 7

I

The Hunter's black raiment was swallowed up by the darkness. It was a moment of despair.

The siblings saw it. They saw the single streak of light that zipped from the heavens down to earth. It split the darkness. To be precise, it was the gleam of a white-hot blade struck by lightning that cleaved the darkness. Covering their ears, the boy and his sister crouched down. For they had heard a voice that wasn't a voice—a scream that was not of this world. Even after it faded, there was no saying how long the vile chill it'd inspired persisted.

When they looked up, they saw the gorgeous features of the figure in the black coat. That alone was enough for Leda to lose herself. The continuing rain, the cold wind, even the shadow of the fear that'd just been erased all seemed to fade into the distance. She didn't really get a sense of how wonderful he seemed. The young man's beauty brought a human's emotions right up to the point of madness.

"D!" Piron called out.

"What?" asked a hoarse voice.

The boy bugged his eyes. "Ah! The little baldy!"

"Oh, shut up!" the baron said, his lips pursing as he stood beside D.

"Where'd you go? You ran off and left us!" Leda said, the corners of her eyes rising irately.

"What are you giving me that look for? Is that any way to treat the person who saved your lives?"

"Saved our lives?" the siblings said in unison, not surprisingly. That sounded impossible—and astonishing. But their eyes were to go wide once again.

"That's right," D assured them.

While the two of them were still reeling, the baron said, "You supposed I just ran off and left the two of you to your fate? Don't treat me like I'm one of your fellow humans. I left because I had some serious thinking to do. Besides, I even warned the two of you to run for it!"

"What was that, anyway?" Leda said in the endearing tone of a young girl.

"Telepathy. That's not the sort of thing just any Noble can do. But it's the kind of power I possess."

"And you kept it a secret from us?" Piron said, suddenly kicking the baron in the shins and drawing a cry of pain from him.

"Stop," said D. A faint smile was on his lips. "It's thanks to this

Nobleman that I returned."

"Really?"

As the baron hopped all around the astonished pair, he said, "Now do you see? I went off to bring this fellow back."

"Well, I'll be," Leda said, folding her hands in front of her chest. She was an actress, plain and simple. "Forgive me, my dear baron. I had no idea. And I never thought you the sort of man who'd run off and leave the two of us behind."

"Well, he's not really much of a man," D said. This time in a hoarse voice.

Finally finished bouncing around, the weeping baron sputtered with tears in his eyes, "Wh-what's that you said?"

"Actually, you did manage to bring him—I mean *me*—back. But what's the story with that darkness we just saw?"

"Wh-what do you mean, 'What's the story'?"

The Hunter's left hand rose. Somehow, the movement didn't seem to be D's doing. "Oh, don't give me that. That darkness was a creature you created to capture humans for your experiments."

"*What?*" Piron exclaimed, eyes bulging. Using both hands, he jerked the barrel of his gun around, training it on the baron.

"No, don't! Stop it!" the Noble cried. "Didn't your parents teach you anything? You're not supposed to go around pointing guns at people."

"Stop it, Piron," Leda said.

Although Piron lowered his weapon, he wasn't entirely convinced. "I don't understand any of this," he said. "Explain it to me, mister."

"This is the area where the shrimp had his vacation home," the hoarse voice said.

The siblings' eyes were drawn to its source—D's left hand, hanging easily by his side.

Unbothered, the voice continued. "But we're talking about more than five thousand years ago. While he slumbered, there were massive shifts in the earth's crust, swallowing the whole place. Which included a horrifying research facility. Well, the shrimp found the entrance to it and called this guy—I mean, *me*—back."

"Would it be as easy as all that to find?"

"It was my castle, you simpleton! I could find a way into it in any day or age."

Turning, D looked down the street—the direction in which the darkness had left. A hoarse voice said, "Well, let's head in, then."

"*What?*" Piron gasped, eyes nearly popping from their sockets.

"It hasn't been finished off," the hoarse voice told the boy. "That thing will be back. It looks like it has the ability to repair itself automatically."

"Then you can't kill it?"

"We'll leave that to *him*."

Speared by the gaze of the other three, the baron took a quailing step back. “I never gave it the ability to repair itself. Someone must’ve modified it in the last five thousand years.”

“Are you trying to tell us somebody could alter one of your devices?”

“Strike my last comment,” the baron said brazenly, folding his arms. “That it knew of my awakening after five millennia and powered up again is all well and good, but this self-repair ability—hmm. It might’ve acquired the ability to evolve . . .”

“It’s coming,” D said.

Abandoning his train of thought, the baron said, “It can’t be helped. Follow me.” He tossed his chin in the direction of the general store.

A second later they dashed for the building, D alone composed, the others frantic. As soon as they were in the store, the baron crashed right through the doors to the back room. Barreling through them, they found themselves in an office. Continuing straight, they turned to their right when they came to a dead end. An elevator door was set in the wall there. The baron pushed the down button. The doors immediately opened, and all four piled in.

The baron touched his finger to a button with a downward-pointing arrow. They rapidly descended further and further.

Less than five seconds had passed before Piron said, “The panel only shows one floor, but we’re going down so far and so fast. What’s going on?”

“At present, we’re a thousand yards down—and we’ll be there soon.”

The baron’s statement proved correct. Roughly thirty seconds later, the elevator halted.

“Three thousand yards down. That was a hell of a shift in the earth’s crust.”

The door opened and the baron stepped out. As Piron followed after him, the boy could only murmur, “What in the world is going on here?”

It was strange that an elevator in a store operating on the surface would lead to a facility that’d sunk into the earth five millennia earlier. Now, the very walls of the white corridor appeared to be giving off light.

“Sis, aren’t the homes of the Nobility supposed to be made of stone? This is like something from another world.”

“That’s the sort of thing bumpkin Nobles go for. Continuing the traditions of our forebears? Sheesh! That musty stuff turns my stomach!”

After walking for less than a minute, the baron halted, and an elliptical entrance opened in the wall before him.

It was a strange room. Piron’s remark summed it up nicely when he said, “What the hell? This is even smaller than the store. And it doesn’t even have any tables or chairs or anything.”

“There are tables. There are chairs, too. Have a seat over there. I’ll expand the place now.”

Taking three steps to the center of the room, the baron waved his hands to either side. Seeing the walls recede without a sound, Leda's eyes widened. Piron was backing away unconsciously when his rear hit something, sending him tumbling back with a cry, only to be caught by a soft chair that'd risen from the floor.

"Wh-what is this?"

Ignoring the cry that might've been of either shock or delight, the baron began to run his fingers over the control panel that'd also risen from the floor. As he looked at a screen that couldn't be seen from where Piron and his sister were, there was a fierce turbulence in his eyes.

"This is bad, D. You know what I mean?"

Standing behind him, the young man in black said, "It's coming, isn't it? Can you control it?"

Already moving both hands feverishly, the baron turned and said, "Oh, no!" in a dialect the siblings had never heard before. "Gaining control of it is impossible. When you cut into it earlier, it caused a malfunction, and the shock of the shift in the earth's crust made its logical processor go crazy."

"Lousy piece of crap," the hoarse voice said.

The siblings finally went over to the others and peered down at the screen. Leda swallowed hard. Piron was speechless.

It showed the elevator doors. And they were opening. No—where the two doors met, something black was seeping out. That dark shadow.

"It came after us, eh?" the baron said, and for some reason he looked at the two children and licked his lips. "Okay, are both of you going out there, or do we just offer it one? It doesn't matter which one of you is sacrificed. Ah, there is no greater love than this!"

His words suddenly became a cry of pain. D's fist had delivered a blow to the Nobleman's bald pate.

"Oooooh," the baron groaned, his eyes spinning from what surely had been a powerful strike. However, when the Hunter grabbed him by the collar, hoisted him into the air, and shook him violently, the baron cried, "Hey, you're making me dizzy! Unhand me!"

"That bastard was fine all along," Piron grumbled.

"At this rate, it'll swallow the research facility too," D said.

Not only the children, but even the baron sighed with relief. D had spoken in his own voice.

"What'll happen if it swallows us?" Leda cried out shrilly.

The shadowy mass on the screen had begun advancing down the corridor. The walls and ceiling were being stained with black.

Pursing his lips, the baron replied, "That's a secret."

Beside him, D asked, "Can it be stopped?"

"No, it's gone haywire now. It's not the same thing that I built," the baron said, puffing his chest. Piron came up behind him, kicking him in

the ass and sending him flying.

"Don't leave this room," was all D told them before leaving through the exit that formed in the wall.

"What a man," Leda moaned. The girl's face was glowing with rapture. "He's truly a man among men. D! I'll remember that name as long as I live!"

"What's a punk kid like you doing getting all damp in the crotch? He might be tall and handsome, but he's not a real man. He's a born swindler. Now, a real man's more like meeeeeh!"

Leda had hurled a shoe, hitting the baron square in the face and sending him reeling, but the children ignored him, fixing their attention instead on the screen.

II

The darkness proceeded down the corridor.

I wanna see D, Leda wished with all her heart, and at that instant the screen split in two to show D standing in front of a wall.

"He's out of his mind," the baron groaned, his words hammering the children's ears. "When I first put that thing together, it used to bring the humans it caught back here. But now, I can't imagine what it'll do. Maybe it hurls them into the depths of space or transports them to another dimension. Earlier, it had its guard down, but that won't be the case this time. The only one who could destroy it is—"

Leda turned. "Who?" she asked. Her tone was doleful.

"There's only one person in the world who could do it. Perhaps not even that."

"Then D . . ."

As the girl stood there, dumbstruck and reeling, Piron put a hand on her shoulder and shook her. "Here it comes," he said. "They're gonna collide!"

The screen returned to a single image—D and the darkness that spread before him. Even through the screen they could feel the terrible killing lust of the darkness, which had halted. And for his part, D was a true combatant. The gorgeous figure in black basked in the aura of malice, totally unaffected.

"Impossible," the baron murmured again. "My *darkness*—it's afraid?"

At that instant, an unintelligible scream rang out in the room. The darkness had once again assailed D. This time, he didn't have the aid of the lightning.

There was a flash. D's blade.

The world was ruled by darkness.

"Oh, no," the baron said in a tone that was nearly a mumble. "If it swallows him . . . Too late."

"It can't be!" Leda shouted. "There's no way he could be defeated. If

you even suggest it, I'll tear you limb from limb!"

"Sis, what's that?"

Turning, Leda stared in the direction Piron's finger pointed. A black stain was spreading across the wall at the door. The darkness had come!

There was a shriek, which came from the baron, of course. Not saying a word, the children backed away. Before their very eyes, the walls and ceiling were stained pitch black.

"Sis?"

"Piron!"

Above the heads of the children, the darkness loomed like a gigantic wolf. The two of them felt an immense power wind around their bodies. And then—nothing happened.

Piron opened his eyes.

Leda screamed.

Suddenly, the grip on them was broken.

Diverting his gaze and sulking, the baron murmured, "Defeated."

What he referred to lay at the trio's feet. The darkness. It'd halted eight inches from the end of Leda's foot, and Piron gave the edge of it a light kick. A black mist covered him up to the ankle, but it quickly dispersed across the floor. Piron went down on one knee, gazing intently at its particulate remains. He soon put his hand to his chin and said, "Sis, this thing's a machine."

"Huh?" Leda said, looking at him, but that was all she managed to do.

"Look."

Holding out his index finger, Leda's brother brought a collection of the black particles up to her eye. Focusing her gaze, she could see that they were indeed metal.

The two of them slowly turned. The baron was whistling and trying to act nonchalant. Piron was about to say something, but Leda stopped him.

"Please, don't. There's no point saying anything to this—I mean, to *the good baron*."

"Ain't that the truth," said a hoarse voice that hardly suited the speaker, but how sweet it sounded against their eardrums.

"D?"

By the time the siblings had twisted around, the young man in black had already sheathed his blade.

"How'd you do it?" the baron inquired almost in a whisper. "No Noble should've been able to destroy my machine. Particularly after it evolved on its own and became even more horribly devious. How did you destroy it? Tell me."

D answered, "Let's go."

The siblings thought there must've been another exit, but D went right into the darkness. The darkness of the machine.

"Sis?"

Leda gave the hesitant Piron a firm nod. "It's okay. *He* went in, after all. We'll be fine, too." And although Piron still couldn't hide his apprehension, she took his hand and followed D.

In the depths of the darkness they could faintly make out D's form. The way he walked, never looking back, was exquisite. So much so that not only did Leda let out a long sigh, but so did Piron.

It shouldn't have been far to the elevator, yet no matter how long they walked through the darkness, they didn't reach it.

"There's something strange about this place," Piron said, stopping and looking around.

"What is it?"

"I can sort of see through this—hey, what the hell is that?"

"Come to mention it—oh, God, it's bones!" said Leda.

"What kind of bones?" Piron's tone was flat, yet it was evident that he was controlling his panic.

"All kinds. Skulls, femurs, vertebrae, pelvises—pretty much any kind of bone you can think of is out there in the darkness. From all the folks in town."

The boy didn't know what to say to that.

"It's one hell of an evolution this thing's gone through," the baron said right behind them in a sulking tone, but they couldn't get angry with him anymore.

Following after D in that manner, they were through the darkness after another five minutes or so. Blinding sunlight shone down on a muddy street. The three of them were standing in the middle of the road.

Looking up at the sky, Leda said, "Look where the sun is—is it past noon already?"

"We weren't walking even ten minutes!"

D stood by their side, but before he could say anything, the baron cleared his throat, saying, "Allow me to explain."

"Shut up, you bald midget!"

"Wh-*what* did you call me?"

"Stop it, Piron," Leda said, apparently still trying to play the good girl. "Kindly tell us more, my good baron."

"Don't you know where we were? That was three thousand yards underground!"

"Hell, that much we knew," the boy snapped back.

"So, we walked all the way out and back to the surface. That would take until noon the next day. How sad to be human. You can't even comprehend that? Ha, ha, ha!"

"How the hell would we know that, you stupid Noble?" Piron said, kicking him again.

Perhaps the baron was a slow learner, or maybe it was a problem

with his reflexes, but he let out a cry and began hopping around.

"At any rate, we made it outside okay," D said in a hoarse voice.

Leda donned a mystified expression.

"Get something to eat and take a rest," D said, his voice changing once again.

Leda was absolutely spellbound.

"We'll set out before sundown. The next town is Toro."

And with that, D became a black statue.

"Ah!" the baron exclaimed, his fuzzy caterpillar eyebrows rising. "The ground's quaking. Damnation! The research facility's reactor has started to overload!" To the dumbstruck siblings he said, "We've got to clear out. We have maybe five minutes to get at least six miles from here."

"That's insane! We don't even have a horse," Piron said, shaking his head despondently.

"Why don't you shut it down already?" the hoarse-voiced D barked at the baron, but the Nobleman simply shook his head.

"I can't do that. I only managed to keep it under control until a minute ago."

"Then what are we supposed to do?" Leda asked in a tone fitting her now-pale countenance.

"The key lies right there," the baron said, tossing his chin in D's direction.

Though a hint of hope streamed into the pair's faces, the ashen hopelessness swiftly returned. Not even D could possibly carry the three of them over six miles in less than five minutes.

"What'd you have in mind, jerk?" the hoarse-voiced D snapped at the Noble. "That's just plain impossible."

"In that case, stay here and be engulfed by the flames," the baron said with a mocking grin. His finger was aimed at D. "But there's no need for that. Not if you were created by the man I know. This situation should be child's play. You may not know it, but *the you you don't know* knows it. So, if you don't want to die, try to let it out. Show your true power—the abilities of a Noble among Nobles, that *he* gave you. That is the true possibility of tomorrow!"

He was nearly ranting. Even the siblings, who'd been looking at the Noble like he was an idiot, were left breathless. All his grand talk had been invested with a burning sincerity.

D remained silent. Not shaken, but breathing faintly, as still as a holy winter's night.

"One minute left," the baron said.

"Hey, what the hell should I do?" the hoarse voice asked. The girl and her brother no longer believed it was D's.

"I really don't know," the baron replied. Clutching his leather satchel, he swallowed hard. "Ten seconds."

His tone was poised on the brink between life and death, making it seem there was no difference between humans and Nobility.

D turned his face upward. He'd just caught a certain voice that he alone could hear.

You are my only success.

In a spot in the northern Frontier, a little town was wiped from the face of the earth. The surface was gouged by a massive crater six miles across and more than half a mile deep, with not a single molecule remaining of what had once been there, but the investigating team from the Capital was surprised to find not the slightest trace of radiation.

III

A porcine grunt echoed in the darkness, and the baron awoke.

"What a revolting sound. This is a nightmare," he murmured, and then his expression grew bitter. He'd just realized that it'd been *his* grunt.

Before getting up he checked on the leather satchel in his right hand, then looked all around him.

"Yipes!"

There was desert as far as the eye could see. The sunlight shining down from overhead scorched the white sand. His nostrils were assailed by the unmistakable odor of burning sand. He peered all around, but all he could see was an endless succession of sand dunes.

"Hmm, was I thrown all this way by the shock of the blast? I probably won't be seeing any of the others again, I suppose. Well, at least I'm alive. That's something. Leave it to the man they call D. When it came right down to it, he was everything I expected. You did well, Sacred Ancestor!"

After getting a handle on the situation and his fate, the baron held a hand up over his head, saying, "What a dilemma! It seems the fate God has in store for Alpulup Macula is to shrivel up in the sun. Damn it, there's nothing to do but fight that, then. My kind challenged the very gods!"

His exclamations were drunk up by the stark light and blue sky.

Letting out a single sigh, the baron murmured, "Guess I'll get going." About to start forward, he paused. "But which way should I go? For that matter, *where* should I go? Back to my own domain? No, that's too far. I have no recollection of this desert. Perhaps one of the lowly humans' towns? No, no! As soon as they found out I was a Noble, I'd promptly have them driving a crude stake through my regal yet feeble heart. That said, I suppose I have no place to go. Damnation! I wonder if any Noble has a castle in the area. Oh, there's no place left in the world for a Noble now. No helping that. Be that as it may, I should press on."

Looking quite dismayed, he started off on foot with his satchel in one

hand. He was a tiny speck of a figure waddling through a world of white sand. Seen from high in the heavens, it would've looked as if he only went a dozen inches or so before he came to a stop.

"It's hot!" the baron groaned as he wiped his sweaty bald head.

A sand dune loomed before him, and the thought of what lay beyond it didn't inspire new strength in him.

"Shiiit!" he exclaimed, falling back, spread-eagled, to be baked by the sunlight.

Still, he'd walked about three miles. That was due to his strength as a Noble—though since there normally weren't Nobility who walked in the sunlight, it was unclear whether his achievement was cause for boasting.

His consciousness had rapidly grown fuzzy. Though the Nobility were indestructible, the ability to walk in the light of day had cost him a substantial reduction in stamina.

"Something's not right," he suddenly murmured.

And without knowing what it was, his consciousness was swallowed by the darkness. In this case, his condition must've been similar to the "sunlight syndrome" that plagued D.

A very pleasant sensation spread across every inch of the baron, awakening him once more.

"Ah, I'm alive!"

No sooner did he shout that than water was poured over his head.

"Gaaaah! What are you doing?"

"Oh, little bald guy, were you up before we threw the water on you?"

Three men wearing turbans, sun visors, and heavy goggles were gazing at the baron, who lay on a simple collapsible cot. It was one of them, a bearded giant of a man, who'd dumped a helmet full of water on the Nobleman.

The baron noticed that he was in a tent. That was why his body had returned to normal even before being splashed with water.

Instantly reverting to his pompous, haughty self, the baron asked, "Who are you men?"

"Who the hell are *you*, wearing that sort of getup?" shouted a weedy, thin beanpole of a man. "Who's stupid enough to walk around out in the desert in broad daylight? Everyone knows you get through the days however you can, then move by night. Are you human? Maybe some kind of lunatic?"

"I—I—I'm a Noble, you insolent wretch!" the baron howled, veins bulging in his temples.

That brought an explosion of raucous laughter from the trio. The third—a solid wall of a man—clapped his hands as he said, "Like there are any Nobles that can walk in daylight, you damn fool! We rescued your sorry ass so we could get a reward from your relatives. Okay, give

us your name and address."

"I am Baron Alpulup Macula, ruler of the northern Frontier sector."

"You still screwing with us? Hey, this guy's a real nutjob. Let's strip his stuff off and toss him outside!"

"Yeah!"

The trio rolled up their sleeves—but no matter how badly drained of power, a Noble at his worst would have enough strength to prevail over five or ten humans with one hand. However, the baron's course of action showed just how cowardly he was.

"Hey, wait a second. Stay back. If it's gold you want, I'll show you a way to make all you could ever desire."

"Don't make us laugh!" two of the men snapped vehemently, but the beanpole stopped them.

Focusing an unrelenting gaze on the baron's form, he said, "There's something weird about this bald midget, that's for sure. Maybe he's one of their victims?"

"If he is, he doesn't have no freaking scars from it," the giant said, pointing toward his own neck.

The remaining man, built like a wrestler, grabbed the baron by the base of the throat and hoisted him into the air. "You said you'd get us all the gold we wanted. Well, let's see you make good on that."

"Auuuuuuugh . . . Where's my . . . satchel? In it . . ."

The wrestler turned around, asking, "Where is it?"

Scratching his head, the beanpole replied, "We chucked it. There was nothing in it."

"What about that?"

The wrestler tightened his grip on the baron's neck, making him shout in desperation, "Auuuuuuugh . . . Of course not . . . I'm the only one . . . who can open my bag . . . Hurry . . . Bring it . . . here."

"Get it!" the giant said, and the beanpole positively shot outside.

The wrestler let go of the baron, who immediately fell back on the cot.

The beanpole soon returned. "It ain't there," he said with an exaggerated gesture, weathering the malevolent glares of his compatriots. Four more men came in after him.

"What have you done with it, you dolts?" the baron shouted angrily. "Th-th-that . . . That had the result . . . of all my research in it. Find it . . . you damned simpletons . . . Even if it kills you!"

His voice broke time and again, not because he'd nearly been strangled, but because he was choking on his own rage.

The men's expressions changed. They'd finally realized there was more to the bald man than they'd suspected. Exchanging glances, they nodded, and the giant commanded them, "Okay, split up and look for it!"

"Stay right there!" the wrestler ordered the baron before leaving.

Once the tent flaps had closed, the baron laid back and let the vitality flow back into him, grinning wickedly.

"Idiot. Who in the world would be stupid enough to stay here when someone tells them that? So long as I have a sheet to keep the sun off, I could survive in the desert or the heart of a blast furnace," he chortled.

Still grinning madly, he grabbed the blanket off the bed, then poked his head through the tent flaps for a peek outside. He looked like a burglar checking if the coast was clear. Confirming that all the footsteps and shouts were a good distance away, the baron went outside.

Eyeing the sand dune that loomed before him with suspicion, he said, "What have we here? From the shape of it, this is the same dune I was about to go over when I collapsed. And these scum were on the other side of it? Shit!"

As he muttered to himself, he walked over to where the cyborg horses were hitched. By now he realized the men were huntsmen who specialized in desert work. Grabbing the reins of just one of the cyborg horses tethered to a fence of steel piping, he slapped the hindquarters of the rest and shouted, "Hyah, off you go!" As their reins were lightly twined around the hitching post, the slightest panic was enough to undo them.

A scream rang out. It was that of a female—a young girl, the baron noted. Jumbled with it were odd voices and the reports of firearms.

"What the—" the baron cried despondently, and with good cause. The last cyborg horse had whinnied, reared on its hind legs, and promptly galloped off. He was just about to chase after it when he heard a shout of, "It's a water beast!" The cry that shook the heavens was far more desperate than the baron's.

"Oh shiiiit!"

He was going to flee in the opposite direction from the voices when right in front of him, some men popped out from behind the tent. The trio he'd just met was there, too. All looked like they'd seen a ghost.

The baron's face was tinged with black, for the thing that'd reared up on the other side of the tent had blotted out the sun.

It was a colossal, ocher insect a good fifteen feet long. With a body that resembled a collection of lumps fused together, it displayed no eyes or any other sensory organs. Its hide probably had a metallic luster because of the way it burrowed through the earth to move.

"Shit! The horses are gone!"

The Nobleman was about to run as fast as his legs could carry him when a sharp voice barked, "Don't go anywhere!"

"Yipes!"

The baron froze in his tracks, but then he heard forceful cries of "Okay!" in reply, and gunshots rang out. The men were unloading their firearms into the enormous insect.

"Save that kid!" shouted the wrestler.

“Huh?”

Turning, the baron noticed that the men had their attention focused on something near the water beast’s fingertip-shaped head. Just below it clung a girl he recognized.

“Leda?”

At that point, the girl finally shouted down to them with complete abandon, “Help meeeeee!”

FIVE MILLENNIA OF ANIMOSITY

chapter 8

I

Like the baron, Leda had apparently been blown there by the energy overload. Only she'd been somewhat unlucky—though perhaps it was safe to say she was fortunate just to be alive.

More than Leda's cries, it was the leather satchel hanging from her shoulder that drew a gasp from the baron. "That's mine. Damn that little sneak thief. Hey, get that back for me!" he said, shaking the man beside him by the shoulder.

"And you call yourself human?" the man retorted, knocking the Nobleman over.

"The hell I do!" the baron shot back.

From overhead, something black fell, winding around the man who'd knocked him down. Another water beast had poked its head over the sand dune. This one was thirty feet long.

"What is that thing?" asked the baron. While he couldn't make out its details, it did seem to have a certain solemnity to it. The baron's tone was one of admiration.

The man he asked glanced quickly to either side with bloodshot eyes before replying, "It's a water beast! One of the monsters the Nobility let loose on the world!"

"Why would they do that? Isn't that rather dangerous?"

"That's a question for the Nobles, damn them."

"Hmm—well, I'm sure they must've had their reasons."

"You stupid asshole!" the man shouted, and then he was lifted easily into the air. All that was clear was that the other water beast had caught him. Though the thing had coiled around him, it didn't have hands or feet to hold him, yet it seemed to adhere to him as it carried him away.

"Break out the mortars!" the beanpole shouted. Blood streamed from his forehead.

Two men dove into the tent, then each carried out a black cylinder supported by a base. Apparently the cylinders were already loaded. Setting them down in the sand, they took aim through the sights and pulled the firing levers. Two streaks of white smoke and flame arced elegantly into the air, sinking into the water beasts. Fireballs formed. They were the color of blood. The beasts were blown apart.

Pieces of them rained down. The baron covered his head. However, it wasn't blood and chunks of flesh that rained down on him.

"Water?"

Right beside him, the giant remarked with apparent disgust, "What's

so surprising about that? They're liquid creatures that move through the ground, after all. They say it's easier for them to move as a liquid than a solid. Say, are that kid and Ernie okay?"

Ernie must've been the name of the man who'd been carried away.

One of the men headed toward the dune, checked the figure on the ground, then shook his head.

"Didn't make it, eh? How about the girl?"

"She's all right," the wrestler called out from the other side of the tent.

"Well, that's something," the giant said, heaving a sigh.

"Are you guys idiots?" the baron asked in utter amazement. "You got knocked around and lost one of your own, all for one little girl. Which is more important to you: some girl you've never seen before, or one of your compatriots? Well?"

The baron wore a frightened expression as the men who surrounded him stared him down.

"So, you think a man should run off and leave a little girl to her fate? You call yourself human, you son of a bitch?" the giant said, shoving the baron's shoulder.

"Wh—what do you think you're doing?" the baron shot back.

"No, you're wrong. He's a Noble!"

All eyes focused on Leda, who stood by the side of the tent. The girl's clothes were tattered, her right shoulder exposed, and she was covered from head to foot with sand, but she pointed at the baron and shouted, "I know that guy—he's a Noble who can walk in the light of day! Don't let him trick you."

A few minutes later, the hogtied baron had been put back in the tent.

"If you're a Noble, you should find the place we'll be taking you shortly pretty interesting. And behave yourself if you don't want a stake through the heart."

A few minutes after that, Leda was tossed in, also tied up.

"What happened to you? Did you try to rip them off?" the baron asked nonchalantly.

"They're the ones running a scam," Leda spat. "They say they're Desert Hunters, but what they do is find people who've run into monsters out in the desert and sell them off in a nearby town!"

"Sell them off? You mean they trade in humans?"

"Bingo!"

"So, the only reason they saved you was so they could sell you?"

"That's not all, though. When they rescued me, they really were concerned about me."

"Then at some point after rescuing you, they no longer cared what happened to you?"

"I guess so."

“I don’t understand that at all,” the baron said, and then he fell silent, blue veins bulging in his temples. “If you’re simply going to sell the person you save, you shouldn’t even save them in the first place. Or do they save them so they can sell them? But then there’s the chance some of them will get killed, so, as you said, they must’ve truly intended to help you. This just gets more and more confusing. What are humans, anyway?”

“How should I know? But that’s a fine question to be asking at your age.”

In a strangely childish turn, Leda was in the process of sticking her tongue out at him when the tent moved.

“We’re on the move. Where are we headed?”

“To the slave market. It’s near the town of Toro.”

“The hell, you say! I’m a Noble!”

“That’s why they’re gonna sell you. A Noble goes on the block maybe once in a hundred years. Now, a Noble who can walk around in broad daylight—that’s a real curiosity!”

“A curiosity? I’ll show you who’s a curiosity! I’m going to escape. I couldn’t bear the humiliation of being sold into slavery.”

“You know your leather bag? They’ve got it. What can you do empty handed? The sun will be going down in a little while, and when it does, the desert outside will be crawling with monsters. The days are too hot for them, too, so they prowl by night.”

“Damnation!”

“Just settle down. This is how life goes. Something will turn up—in one form or another.”

“Don’t presume to lecture me, you slip of a girl!”

“Slip of a girl? You’ve been asleep for five thousand years and don’t have a clue how the world works! In my fourteen years, I’ve gotten to taste all the good and bad this world has to offer. When I was six, my mother and father ran off, and my brother and me were picked up by a thief. We’ve been living that way ever since. You know, a vigilance committee cut off my left tit. My little brother doesn’t have any toes on his right foot. See, he made a grab for a gangster’s bankroll. Still, life goes on. And the next time you start that ‘What are humans?’ trash, I’ll kick your nuts in.”

The baron bared his teeth. Everything she’d said contradicted what Piron had told them when they first met. And no matter how he looked at it, the older sister had to be telling the truth. “You—you—you pair of insufferable liars. If I make it out of here alive, I’ll tear you to pieces!”

“Shut up, you half-assed Noble. You’re good for nothing outside your precious castle walls, so don’t go threatening children!”

The tent shook violently as they continued squabbling, on the way across the twilit desert toward the town of Toro.

With the coming of dawn, the tent stopped and the beanpole came in.

"We're there. We'll take a little break, then off to the auction house before noontime."

"Why there?"

"For the auction. They deal in everything from daily essentials to weapons and supernatural creatures. The folks from town set the prices, with the goods going to the highest bidder. Nobles are rare. You're going to make us a damned fortune!"

The baron went mad with rage. "Wh-why, you miserable human bastard, you intend to sell off a Noble? You'll face heaven's wrath for that!"

"Fool," the beanpole sneered. "If ever we felt heaven's wrath, it was when your kind came into the world. At any rate, there's a shower stall in back of the tent. Can't show our customers grubby merchandise, after all. You two had better clean yourselves up real good."

"Ah, that's great," said the girl. "I'll be able to freshen up. Who'll go first?"

"You're so vulgar, you'd have to use it until it drowned you. I shall pass."

"Gross! You're filthy. Why not?"

"Running water is a no-no for the Nobility. Didn't you know that?"

"Ah, yes, now that you mention it. They say that's why there are no castles near rivers. Why, I even heard that a long, long time ago, there were plans to fill in every river on Earth."

"That's right. However, as that would've conflicted with the accurate re-creation of the world of the Middle Ages the Nobility so idolized, the plan was abandoned."

"Wow, so there were some people who were still thinking clearly. Okay, I'm hitting the showers, then."

Lifting the flaps to the back of the tent, Leda disappeared, and before long the sound of the small shower rang out, drawing a grimace from the baron.

The town of Toro was located approximately in the center of the northern Frontier. Since there was a mine in the area that produced an antimatter catalyst, the town had grown extremely prosperous despite its inconvenient location, with a population of around seven thousand and a reputation as one of the five most successful communities in the northern Frontier. The suburbs were equipped with an airport for shipping ore, and the train tracks into the industrial zone were always humming, with fifty cars a day of cargo coming and going. Consisting of the usual bars and casinos, the entertainment district was as busy as could be, with many of the places lit up with neon and open for business even by day. The effect was enhanced by an artificial night that covered the entertainment district alone—a bit of scientific trickery made

possible by particle-tinting technology.

Beneath the clear blue sky, that part of town was sealed in darkness, from which spilled singing and gunshots and the glow of lights in the quarter that never slept. Its habitués were drifters, gamblers, bartenders, dancing girls, outlaws, warriors, killers, bodyguards, prostitutes, monster peddlers, arms dealers, and so on, and so on. Any form of vice that could be conceived of in a Frontier town was put into action in this area that was dark even by day.

That included the slave trade. And today's auction was a little different from usual. First to be led out before the ranks of monster dealers, bordello owners, and rich folks were a girl who seemed to be about thirteen or fourteen and a short, fat, bald man. After the girl—Leda—was pulled up onto the auction block, the crowd that pressed forward was then left surprised, dumbfounded, and snickering the moment they laid eyes on the bald man who followed—Baron Macula. On hearing his introduction as a Noble—and one who could walk in the light of day, at that—their reactions became peals of laughter.

"Who's a Noble? You mean that uncouth midget?"

"He has the face of an imbecile, a real moron."

"He's just some Nobility-obsessed old guy. Get down from there right now, you damned fool!"

Though the baron met that hail of jeers and insults with protests that he was a genuine Noble, he only fueled the mocking laughter.

Leda went up for auction first, and she was won by the madam of a bordello called Pastoral.

"Yes!" the girl exclaimed, pumping her fist triumphantly. It was unclear whether she was excited because she'd finally found a steady means of employment, or because she was confident she could run off at some point in the future.

It didn't appear to anyone that the baron would fetch more than a thousand dalas when he went up next, but a cry of "Ten thousand dalas!" came from a potential buyer, so the matter was decided without any further commotion or even any counterbids.

II

"The self-proclaimed Baron Alpulup Macula is sold to Madame Belle Kamiskly!"

After the auctioneer's pronouncement, the baron gazed out at the audience from his place on the block with an inquisitive look, but he only saw someone who looked like the steward of a well-heeled family. As he came down off the block, the Nobleman asked the auctioneer, "Hey, just who is this person you mentioned?"

"The lady is one of the most famous people in town. She's quite renowned for her various collections. It may well be that you'll be going

into one of her collections, too. As *Noble #1*."

Surrounded by armed personnel, the baron was loaded into a sumptuous carriage and driven straight to a residential area to the south of town. No one dared to carry the commotion of the entertainment district all the way out here. That was the rule in town—one that need not be put in writing. The carriage passed through the gates of an estate so vast it took another thirty minutes from that point to reach the house. The house was like a veritable castle or church from the Middle Ages, and on entering it, the baron was greeted by android servants and ushered into a hall of sorts.

"What is this place?" the baron muttered, since the room was bound by a faint gloom. "Is this what entertains the lowly human curiosity seekers? Hmph! Mark my words: I'll escape from here, and then there'll be a reckoning, I swear!"

And having laid his curse, the baron twitched his nose. A certain odor hung in the house.

"That's the smell of blood. Hmm . . ."

Any other Noble would've been licking their lips, their eyes agleam, but the baron looked rather hopeless as he buttoned the neck of his jacket.

"There's something unsettling about all this. I'm a sensitive Noble. I desire well-lit interiors."

As if waiting for him to say precisely that, a single beam of light shone down on the floor in front of the baron. A figure came into view. The baron gasped aloud.

Leda arrived at Pastoral about an hour before the baron reached his destination. She was promptly escorted to the dressing room, where she was told, "Change into whatever outfit you like. Then you can start learning the basics."

The woman who'd escorted her left, and when she'd finished getting changed, a different middle-aged woman in garish makeup appeared, saying, "You have a customer. I'm surprised. He says he heard about the auction."

"But I still don't know anything."

"Oh, don't worry about that. A woman's born knowing right off the bat how to please a man. Now, get out there and make some money."

"Yes, ma'am!" Leda replied with the aplomb of a seasoned professional, following the woman to a waiting room.

On seeing her customer, Leda froze in her tracks.

"Lord Begley, what are you doing here?" the baron cried out. He stopped, shocked. "Your expression—it's one unique to those who've undergone brain surgery. What in the world happened to you?"

Perhaps overwhelmed by the sight of an acquaintance from five

thousand years ago in such a pitiful state, the baron stepped closer without thinking and grabbed the other man by the shoulder. The man's clothes were in tatters, he had a long beard, and there was a hard clanking down at his feet. His limbs were secured to the floor by long chains.

"Who could do such a thing to a Nobleman famed for his unrivaled courage? You'll pay for this, you human scum!"

Once again, his words acted as a trigger. The world filled with dazzling light. Shrill laughter echoed from somewhere in the lofty ceiling. Android servants—or *servoids*, as they were known—were clustered about an old woman who stood by the door. Her long gown had countless gemstones stitched to it.

"You have terrible taste, you old crone. Release the two of us immediately, wretch. Lord Begley needs a doctor—no, I shall see to his care personally!"

"Welcome to my mansion," the old woman said in a frightfully hoarse voice. "I've collected so many things. However, at long last I have a second Noble. I'll be able to vent my animosity on you for another century."

"A century?" the baron said, his eyes narrowing, and then they opened preposterously wide as he jumped up. "You've kept Lord Begley like this . . . for a century? A miserable human like you? What ill will . . . do you bear *him*?"

He was so angry, he had trouble even speaking, and steam rose from his bald head. But a cool voice chilled him off.

"He receives such treatment because he's a Noble. Ah, leave it to the Nobility! You can do things to them that would kill a human being a thousand times over, yet they regenerate without a problem. How wonderful that is, and how horrible."

The baron grew red as a boiled octopus. "Damn you, I'll get you for that!" he cried, and he was just about to charge at the old woman when a thin arm wrapped around his neck from behind. "Lo-Lord Begley?" the baron stammered, and as his shocked face swiftly flushed, blood began to drip from his nostrils.

"That will do," the old woman said, stopping Begley. "He's going to take your place entertaining me for the next century. Step aside, now."

The arm came away, and the baron, now free, put his hand to his throat and coughed. A pale blue light flashed around him. His nose was assailed by the smell of ions and air seared by a jolt of high voltage. The electrical discharge bays in the servoids' chests were open. Lord Begley writhed in the flames and black smoke. Jolts of electricity continued to strike him.

“Please, don’t hold this against me,” the old woman said almost in a whisper. “I think it safe to say Lord Begley doesn’t hold it against me.”

“What did he do?” the baron shouted. “And next, it’s to be me? What did I ever do to you?”

“You do know what the Nobility did to human beings, don’t you?” the old woman asked in return.

She quickly got her answer.

“Because we treated you like slaves? What was wrong with that? That was our relationship, wasn’t it? Your kind didn’t complain about it. At least, not five thousand years ago.”

Beneath swollen eyelids, the old woman blinked almost imperceptible eyes. “Five thousand years?”

“That’s right. I’ve been asleep for the last five millennia. However, I can imagine what happened in the interim. But no matter what that was, isn’t five thousand years enough water under the bridge?”

The old woman laughed thinly. “Oh, five thousand years? For your answer, kindly watch this.”

Suddenly, the area around the baron was enveloped in flames. The gloom changed—to darkness! To the left and to the right, figures were fleeing. Humans. Some were alone, some were men holding their children by the hand, or women clutching babies close. The sound of heavy breathing rang in the baron’s ears, and the swirling night winds buffeted his cheeks. He wasn’t in the vast chamber. In the heavens, the nearly full moon shone, and when he focused his gaze, he could make out burning houses and the outline of a castle’s walls in the distance. The screams of the women and shouts of the men made the baron cringe.

A party of black riders and steeds cut in front of him.

What’s this?

As the baron stood frozen in place, just before him the tip of a lance reflected the moonlight. The shadowy figures landed amid the fleeing people. Skewering one after another like beef kebabs, they hoisted the impaled people into the air on their lances. The baron saw a crimson mist scattering in the darkness. Right in front of him a black steed halted, and a particularly large rider looked down at him. The rider took the shape he held with his left hand and brought it up to his mouth. Lifting his helm as if to allow the baron to see him and then focusing his gaze, he quickly wheeled his horse around.

“Wait . . .”

The baron had taken a step forward when a small figure was thrown down at his feet. The corpse of a boy who looked to be three or four years old. His neck had been bitten halfway through.

Stillness returned.

He was back in the same room.

“Do you still believe five thousand years is long enough for our

rancor to fade?" the old woman asked, her tone enough to make the baron stand bolt upright.

"I don't know how the world is at present. But five millennia ago, that was normal. Who are you, anyway? You may be old, but I don't think you've lived five thousand years."

"I may not have lived five thousand years, but our hatred survives. I have inherited the task of making the Nobility taste that hatred."

"You know, I don't have any idea what you're talking about. Holding onto a petty curse and keeping it alive for five millennia—you humans are such dark creatures. Hell, we should've destroyed the lot of you!"

"Silence!" the old woman commanded, raising her right hand.

A number of points of light formed in the darkness. From them, streaks of light pierced the immobilized form of Lord Begley. Though they were fainter and weaker than the servoids' electrical discharge, they hurt the lord a million times worse. His clothes burst into flames, and his flesh melted.

It was sunlight.

The baron threw himself on top of the writhing, melting Nobleman to shield him.

"Would you stop it already? When did you capture him? How many years must you torment him before you're satisfied? Just think of it—he's immortal. That means he'll feel that pain for all eternity. Your kind were killed quickly, without having to suffer much at all. Give me a stake. Let me put him out of his misery once and for all."

The old woman didn't smile. The look she gave the baron was a strange one. "You're right . . . Perhaps it has been too long."

The baron's eyes widened as he gazed at the old woman. A pale, three-foot-long stake had been dropped at his feet. As the baron was bending over to pick it up, the woman said, "Please, don't."

She stepped forward and picked it up instead. Raising it high, she said, "I shall dispose of him."

She walked over to the lord with a gait so smooth it didn't seem that of an elderly woman. Black smoke and little flames still covered his upper body, but she took aim directly at his heart.

"Let's put an end to this now. Farewell, Lord!"

She drove the stake forward.

III

The finely honed tip was caught between iron-like fingers and jerked aside. In the blink of an eye, the old woman was held fast in a man's arms.

"Lord Begley?" she cried out in astonishment. The baron hadn't moved.

The stake was held horizontally and pressed against the side of the

old woman's throat like a door bolt sliding closed, and a wicked grin formed on a pair of lips, revealing fangs—those of Lord Begley. The lord laughed aloud. Bordering on insane—but most certainly *not* crazy—his howling laughter shook that world of gloom.

"Lord Begley, my good man, you were in your right mind all along?"

"Ah, my friend, I remember you well. Have the years been kind to you, Baron Macula?"

"I've managed to get by. It pleases me to no end to meet you here. Why, I feel like I have a legion of men to support me now."

"Ha, ha! As always, you're a timid man, depending on others. But wait. Before you and I can begin five thousand years of prosperity, I shall rid myself of five millennia of animosity."

"What do you mean?"

"Once I've torn this woman limb from limb, we shall take this insipid little estate for our own and begin conquering the surrounding area."

"Oh, Lord, I don't think that would be very . . ."

Eyes ablaze with flaming vengeance shot right through the baron.

"Do you have some objection?"

The baron recoiled, saying, "No, not at all. Well, actually, a little bit."

"What is it?"

"I wonder if the lowly humans might not have fairly good reasons for hating us."

Lord Begley had nothing to say to that.

"Don't get me wrong. What I'm trying to say is—couldn't both sides let it go already?"

As the baron was wringing his hands, Lord Begley gazed at him with eyes filled with scorn. "It was five thousand, three hundred long years ago that their kind attacked me while I slept and took me captive. From that day till this, I've been their plaything. I, who controlled seventy percent of the northern manors, a toy for the likes of humans! Can you fathom the humiliation of that?"

"O-of course."

"How could you understand? Are you *me*?"

"No need to twist my words."

"Then keep your unwarranted comments to yourself. For more than five thousand years, I've had stakes driven into my limbs, sunlight burning my face, and acid dissolving my flesh and bones just for their amusement. My manors were all burned, reduced to ashes. My daughter, my son, and my retainers were all destroyed. If it were you, what would you do now? Would you make peace with the humans as if nothing at all had happened?"

"I don't suppose I could."

The old woman's body twisted and squirmed. "That was because you slaughtered people," she said. "For no reason at all, you carried off girls

from the village to use in cruel experiments, and when their families tried to stop you, they were viciously murdered."

"Such is the proper relationship between the Nobility and the human race."

The tip of the stake sank into the old woman's chest, making fresh blood drip from it. She cried out as if the sounds were being crushed from her.

"That's not . . . I mean . . ." the baron said in haste. "When you think about it, both sides are to blame, aren't they? In this case, we need to make some concessions—let's reach a compromise."

"We cannot," the lord said in a tone so severe it froze the hall. "I'll hear no more of your interruptions, weakling. First, for the woman—watch as I show her what it really means to tear someone limb from limb."

Lord Begley raised the stake. The baron witnessed the death throes of the writhing old woman as she was run through the heart.

"Arrrrrgh!" echoed a beastly cry of anguish. Lord Begley was trying to adjust his grip on the stake but the Noble never finished the task, with the weapon falling from his trembling fingers. A needle of rough wood stuck through the back of his hand and out through his palm. Eyes gleaming red with malice, Lord Begley turned. He still showed no signs of releasing the old woman.

Three figures stood there in the gloom. Two were short—a boy and a girl—but the tall one was exquisite. Even in silhouette.

"Who in blazes are you?" Lord Begley inquired, baring his teeth.

"D," the figure said, stepping forward. His right hand reached for the hilt of the longsword that adorned his back.

Though Lord Begley focused bloodshot eyes on his new foe, his expression warped unexpectedly. "What a strange presence I sense. I know of only one other like it. But that is . . . *the great one's* . . ."

He backed away. Shock colored his unsightly face. His hands fell, drained of strength, and the old woman was dropped then and there.

"I have heard things. It was . . . from you, Macula . . . And I only laughed. However . . . it was the truth . . . was it?"

Without making a sound, the vision of beauty came right up to the lord.

Stooping down, the lord picked up the long stake.

"Could it be? Could you be *his*, my lord?"

He held the stake up over his head with both hands, but it was chopped in half by the Hunter's sword. The face of the Noble who'd been tortured by humans for five millennia was split down to the chin, and a heartbeat later a horizontal swipe of the blade danced through the air.

Not even glancing at the body that sprayed a fountain of blood as it thudded to the floor, D went over to the old woman and knelt by her

side. The smaller figures—Leda and Piron—rushed over, too. The two had been reunited thanks to D. He had been Leda's customer back at the bordello—and Piron was with him.

"Are you okay, lady?"

At Leda's query, the old woman opened her eyes and slowly shook her head. "It's my heart . . . I'm not long for this world, now. What of the Noble?"

Spying the ash-gray mound of dust spread across the floor, Piron said, "He's gone."

"Really? That's for the best . . . I really didn't care for . . . what I did . . . to him."

"Is that so?" the baron cried out in surprise.

"Even if he was a Noble . . . it's not like he did anything terrible . . . to me. It's merely that since long before I was born . . . he was in our house . . . And torturing him . . . was my job."

"Wow . . ." Leda and Piron mumbled, their expressions dazed.

"Then why'd this go on for *five thousand years*?"

"From animosity . . . Just as he said . . . I was controlled . . . by pure animosity . . . Strangely enough, I didn't hate him . . . But somehow . . . I did those things . . ."

The baron heaved a long sigh.

"Please believe me . . . I . . . wanted to stop . . . But I couldn't . . . Thinking back on it . . . it was anger over the people he'd killed . . . But that's over now . . . Now I can rest at last . . . and he can . . . too . . . A grave . . . has been prepared . . . in the garden out back . . . Bury me there . . . and him . . . together."

That was all the old woman said before closing her mouth. After a short while, a rasping breath escaped her, a great shudder passed through her body, and the old woman was freed from the cares of the world.

No one moved. Not a word was said.

D turned his back to them, saying, "Let's go." Whether that was directed at the baron or Leda was unclear.

The trio was rooted there, unable to do anything, but when they finally did follow after him, the form of the gorgeous Hunter melted away in the darkness.

A pair of cyborg horses and an elegant carriage were waiting by the mansion's foyer. While D was switching off the servoids, Piron and Leda had brought them from the stables.

Climbing onto one of the steeds and riding out into the light, the baron looked up at the sun and groaned, "Damn, it's bright. Perhaps brightness is all there is to this world."

"The same thing goes for the dark," Leda spat. Then, in a soft, earnest tone she continued, "Maybe they're the same. Maybe humans

and Nobles are, too."

The baron fell silent. As did Piron, and D.

When they reached the gate, Leda halted the carriage. "We're going back to Toro. We'll try to make a living there."

"Good journey to you," the baron said.

D merely gave them a small nod.

Pulling a face, Leda stuck her tongue out at the Nobleman. "I hope we meet again some day," the girl said, looking down at the ground. Her words were directed at D.

D's lips moved. Perhaps he'd even smiled.

"I almost forgot. Here!" Piron cried, reaching under the carriage seat and pulling out something that he threw to the baron. It was his leather satchel, which had been reclaimed from the desert Hunters on the way there.

"Off we go!" Leda nodded, cracking the reins. Drawn by a pair of horses, the carriage sped off toward town.

By Leda's side, Piron—who'd remained silent since they left—stood up and waved one arm with great, sweeping gestures. "See you later, little bald baron and cool dhampir!"

"Little shit," the baron cursed, but for some reason his voice was rather weak. It was time to say goodbye.

"Let's go," D urged, and the two of them rode off in the opposite direction.

"I didn't mention it, did I?" the baron said stiffly.

"What?" the hoarse voice inquired.

The baron ignored it. Perhaps whatever weighed on his soul wouldn't let him hear it. "Five thousand years ago, Lord Begley went to kidnap the village girls at my request."

Perhaps he wanted the Hunter to say something to him. However, there was no response, and the dhampir and the Nobleman went down the road with an endless expanse of blue sky above them and the afternoon light continuing to shine down divinely.

NOBLEMAN ON THE STAND

chapter 9

I

It started raining the second morning after leaving Toro. Out in the middle of the plains, there was nowhere to take shelter from the rain. They ended up draping the waterproof coats from the saddlebags over their heads and pressing on. Still, when the wind came, the rain slapped their faces and pounded their hands. Dhampirs' strength sprang from their Noble blood, and it was halved in the rain.

"Curse you, you blasted imbecile. Couldn't you have at least listened to a weather forecast?" the baron grumbled, but a malfunction in the weather satellite some three millennia earlier made weather forecasts extremely unreliable. In a world where cloudless skies could turn to driving rain in five minutes' time, who could possibly predict the weather?

"Damn it, can't you do something? If this keeps up, I'll have no strength left at all in an hour. Do you know what it's like to be afraid of dissolving in the rain?"

The baron's words weren't mere complaints. Even without being directly exposed to the rain, a Noble out in weather like this would see his biorhythms sink substantially. The core temperature would drop, the muscles would lose stamina, and the leaping and running abilities would be at half their normal level. Therefore, noontime on a rainy day was the best time for hunting the Nobility.

"Would you just suck it up, already?" the hoarse voice responded, and it too sounded languid. "The rain will stop soon. Besides, in another two hours we'll be off the plains."

"Hmph! That's if we don't drown in the saddle before then. Look!"

Pursing his lips, the Nobleman ejected a stream of water with all the skill of a comedian.

"Be sure to show 'em that little trick in the courthouse in Zappara. You might be better off trying to get laughs from the jury instead of sympathy."

"Oh, shut up, you meddling little ventriloquist." Surprisingly enough, the baron still thought D was the source of that hoarse voice. "Speaking of which, there's something I'd like to discuss," the baron said, rubbing his hands together high in the saddle. "So, if we keep going and you bring me to Zappara, you'll probably be paid a pittance. What's more, it seems to me a bond of friendship has taken root in the five days we've spent traveling together. I'd like to see both of us come away satisfied. How about it? Would you be willing to let me get away for a cool

hundred billion dalas?"

"What hundred billion dalas?" said the hoarse voice. "You're a tattered little two-bit Noble. Where are you supposed to get a hundred billion dalas? I bet you've got nothing but lint in your pockets."

"Those are the balls off a squid, actually," the Greater Nobleman replied, laughing uproariously at his own attempt at humor. But he immediately glared at D, saying, "That was a joke. Why aren't you laughing?"

"You're something else," he said in a voice of cold steel. He must've been disgusted.

Nevertheless, the baron seemed satisfied, replying, "Hmm, fair enough. How about your answer, then?"

"When they're done chopping your head off, I'll give you a big, fat kiss on the lips." This time it was the hoarse voice.

The baron squirmed in the saddle. "You dolt. Give this some serious consideration. I'm talking about one hundred billion dalas. Tell you what—I'll make it two hundred billion."

"Where have you got that kind of dough?"

"Right here," he said, giving his leather satchel a loud slap before wedging it in front of himself again. "All my aces are in here. Be thankful I haven't broken them out. If I had a mind to, I could escape at any time."

"Then go ahead and do it. You're all talk, Nobleman."

What ensued was bickering that almost blotted out the sound of the rain, but it was interrupted by the steely voice saying, "The day after tomorrow, we reach Zappara. That's where we part company. And not before."

"D-d-don't you want anything? Don't you realize how beautiful friendship can be? Are you supposed to be a human with Noble blood, or—"

"Or *what*?" the hoarse voice inquired, sounding intrigued.

"No—never mind," the baron said, hastily covering his mouth. "At any rate, just let me go. Please, let me escape. I don't want to have my head chopped off."

"How about a stake then?" the hoarse voice asked.

"Waaaaah!" the baron shrieked, having essentially fallen into a panic.

D just stared at him quietly, but then he suddenly turned his face for a look behind them. The baron quickly turned his gaze that way, too. His Noble blood was at work.

They could sense several things coming up behind them. Cyborg horses and riders. They could tell from the sound of the rain. There were three of them.

"What in the world," the baron said, his voice trembling. And it wasn't due to the rain. It was on account of the ghastly aura billowing at

them from those riders. “What the hell are they?” the baron asked, and then he swallowed hard.

One of the shadowy figures had come from the rear and was riding right alongside them.

“Evening,” he said in a gloomy voice. His gender was clear, but his age was masked by the sound of the rain.

“E-e-e . . .” the baron stammered, only able to get that one sound out. At any rate, he’d apparently intended to respond in kind.

The first one left. The second pulled up.

“Evening,” said the rider. Another man.

“E-e-e . . .”

The third rode up and asked, “Where you headed?”

“Zappara,” D replied.

The rider halted and turned. So did the other two.

“How . . . frightening,” the third rider said. They could tell now it was a woman’s voice.

The baron blinked his eyes.

“To think there’s still anyone in the world with such an air about him—the town of Zappara will be quaking in its boots, I’m sure.”

Rain. That was the only sound the baron heard. It was frightening. He noticed the horses and riders were growing hazy in the distant depths of the rain.

Once they’d dissolved completely, the baron slumped forward and wrapped his arms around his steed’s neck, asking, “What was that?” He was physically and emotionally drained.

“Even rain can’t wipe away the smell of blood and gunpowder,” the hoarse voice said. “Those were warriors. And the kind that specialize in killing, at that.”

“You told them we were going to Zappara, right?” the baron said, quaking against his horse’s neck. “You don’t mean to tell me they’re gunning for me, do you?”

“Why, can you think of any reason those killers would be after you?”

“N-n-no reason at all!”

“Then don’t be scared,” the hoarse voice jeered. “From what I’ve seen up till now, when it comes to humans’ hatred, five thousand years is a drop in the stinkin’ bucket. Those characters were probably hired by some humans with a bone to pick with you after all these years.”

“Shiiiit!”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Once we’re in Zappara, there’ll be a sheriff around. The courthouse will have guards, too. When the trial gets started, your safety will be assured.”

“And what about once it’s over?”

“Don’t worry about that, either. After all, you don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of being found completely innocent and released back into the light of day. They’ll haul you straight off to jail or your place of

execution."

"E-e-execution?"

"Whichever the case, nobody's gonna lay a hand on you except for the official headsman and his ax. So relax."

"Who could relax? I'm absolutely not going into that town. I'll die here."

It was unclear what his intent was, but the baron wrapped his hands around his own neck and let out a choked groan. He quickly gave up, and D waited for the gasping and wheezing Nobleman before giving a kick to his steed's flanks. The town of Zappara lay in the far reaches of the rain. No matter what awaited them there, the graceful figure in black made it clear they had no choice but to go.

Zappara was a mining town about thirty miles south of the center of the northern Frontier sector. Though similar in size to Toro, the town's mines had been scaling back for the last dozen years or so, and the resulting population shift had left it with about two thousand residents. The welcoming arch at the entrance to town was so rusty that the baron snapped, "Positively disgraceful."

D halted his steed in front of the sheriff's office.

"I'll wait out here. Take your time," the baron said, but the Hunter caught him by the scruff of the neck and dragged him into the office.

Once the situation had been explained, the sheriff eyed the baron intently, saying, "I've heard talk about this situation. So, this is the Noble who walks in the light of day? Well, our jail isn't built to hold Nobility. I'm sorry, but could you hold onto him until the trial tomorrow afternoon? I'll inform the hotel."

"My job ends here," D said.

"Yes, that's right," the baron said with a nod. Apparently he believed he could make his escape as long as D wasn't around.

"The fact is, we've got ourselves a bit of a dilemma here," the sheriff said with sincerity, glaring out of the corner of his eye at the baron, who was clearly plotting something. "Before you showed up, three others came to town—top-notch warriors. Gerard, Puff, and Vinne are their names, and they're killers for hire. Seems it's this squirt here they're gunning for."

The baron began to stammer loudly, while D asked, "How do you know that?"

Furrowing his brow, the sheriff looked at the clock on the wall. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you. It's not even noon yet. While I get your transport fee together and finish all the paperwork, why don't you take him for a little walk around town? Then you should see what I mean."

"This has nothing to do with me anymore. I'll be back when the paperwork's done."

As D was about to leave, the baron followed him, saying, “Wait, I’ll go with you.”

They soon saw what the sheriff had meant. As D and the baron began walking down the plank-covered sidewalk, looks of hatred focused on them from every side. From the bat-wing doors of the saloon, from the windows of the casino, from the shadows of the alleys, the spears of hatred shot at the pair with such malice it wouldn’t have been at all strange if the target had dropped on the spot, yet the baron merely cocked his head to one side.

“What in blazes is this? I don’t recall ever doing anything that would draw such ire from the humans.”

“You don’t?” said D.

The baron pursed his lips worriedly.

On returning to the sheriff’s office, the baron immediately demanded an explanation. Not D—the baron.

“What’s with this town? The whole place has it in for me. No way in hell can I get a fair trial here. I demand a change of venue!” *Wham!* he smacked the desk.

“Just doesn’t know when to give up, does he?” the hoarse voice said.

Gazing at D with an unnerved look, the sheriff replied, “The circuit court’s already here. The trial begins at noon tomorrow. Stay in your hotel until then. I’ll post my deputies around it as guards.”

“Hmm.” Seeming somewhat relieved, the baron mopped the sweat from his brow and asked, “At any rate, what’s the reason for this animosity from the people in town?”

“It’s alleged that more than five thousand years ago, you asked Lord Begley and others to abduct the girls of this town. Because the community resisted, the town was put to the torch and nearly a thousand humans were killed. Including babies. This town is made up of the descendants of the survivors.”

The baron was speechless.

“Still waters run deep in this town,” the hoarse voice said, sounding impressed.

Though the baron seemed to be contemplating something with a crafty look in his eye, he stared at the sheriff and asked, “Who are your deputies?”

“Why, they’re people from town.”

“You intend to leave murderers in charge of protecting someone? I’ll have none of that! Besides, how am I to know you’re not in league with them, you bastard?”

“I was called to this town. But I don’t have the resources to protect you myself. Let’s leave that to pretty boy here.”

“My work is done,” D said, pulling his back off the wall.

“You’ll be paid for guard duty.”

A maddened look in his eye, the baron cried out, “Stop! You’re my

only hope. I'll make it worth your while. Please, don't abandon me."

"It's a pity for him, you know. Those killers have a reputation for using whatever dirty tricks they have to so long as it gets the job done. We won't be able to breathe easy even during the trial."

"Help me, please."

Turning his back on the tragicomic tableau, D filled the doorway.

The baron's cries followed him.

"I know where the Sacred Ancestor is!"

Like darkness in motion, D turned.

II

Ultimately, D accepted the baron's offer. Perhaps it was the mere mention of the Sacred Ancestor that did the trick.

Leaving the office accompanied by a high-spirited baron, he rode his cyborg horse toward the hotel. Fifty yards ahead, the building came into view.

"Odd hotel, isn't it?" the baron remarked after turning his gaze on the place. "I've been looking at it for a while, and the first floor's a restaurant. Yet no one's gone in or out of the place."

"Get down off your horse and lie flat on the ground."

"What?"

An arm like steel wrapped around his waist, and a heartbeat later the baron was flying through the air. The instant he landed, he once again sailed up, landing on the sidewalk.

The hotel exploded. The explosives must've been set by a real veteran. Though the blast blew the building away without a trace, almost no fragments of it fell near D and the baron.

"What was that?"

"What the hell was *that*?"

Both voices came from D's vicinity. It went without saying who they represented.

"That was a threat, I take it," D said.

No one had run out of the hotel, and none of the townspeople even came outside. This deed had been well planned and organized.

"A threat? They'd blow up a whole hotel just for that?"

"Their hatred runs deep, and the whole town's in on it," the hoarse voice replied in amazement.

"Our lodgings are gone. Want to go back to the sheriff's office?"

No sooner had D spoken than a voice from behind him called out, "Hey, bro!"

A familiar face was hustling down the sidewalk. Apparently he'd been in the casino. It was the hairless fatty Tong, and between him and the powerfully built Galil was Delilah, with her blazing red hair.

"Out of the blue, it was like *ka-boom*! You okay?" Tong inquired, the

words bubbling out of him.

"I'll survive," D replied, his tone as curt as ever, but there was a little sense of warmth in there somewhere.

"You might be fine, but what about the little bald Nobleman? Oh, there's a good boy."

Galil was reaching to pat him on the head, but the baron batted the man's hand away, saying, "I don't believe I need to allow filthy Hunters like the lot of you to touch my person. Back, lowly humans. Back, I say!"

"Still short on everything but hot air, I see, Mr. Greater Noble," Delilah said, blowing him a kiss.

"Were you headed to that hotel?" Galil asked, giving a toss of his chin to the black smoke and flames of the building.

"That's right," said the hoarse voice.

Though the trio looked shocked at first, they accepted it soon enough.

"We got here yesterday and have been hearing a lot of things. Seems you've jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire, eh?"

"A tiny nation that sank into the sea apparently had a saying about that: *Like moths to a flame*."

"At any rate, I think that was meant to piss you off. Got someplace to stay?" Tong asked with a grin.

"Back that way."

On seeing the direction D's face was turned, a different voice said, "With the sheriff? The jail's not all that hospitable. Come along with us." Mikado seemed to bulldoze his way through his three compatriots, continuing, "That bar over there's got a hotel on the second floor. Pretty nice rooms."

"Think I'll pass."

"Why? We're guests there. The hotel folks won't give us any trouble."

"I'd better not," D said, stepping down from the sidewalk and getting back on his cyborg horse.

The baron stood with arms akimbo, whining like a spoiled child, "No! I want to stay in the hotel!"

The Hunter gave him a look. The glint in his eye deflated the baron like a balloon, and the Noble walked dejectedly back to his own cyborg horse and mounted up.

"Hey, the trial's tomorrow, right? What do you say to joining us for a drink once the bald shrimp's been thrown in the slammer?" Tong suggested.

"Yeah, come on. Let's have a drink together," Delilah added.

D was already riding away. After his steed had taken two or three steps, the Hunter's left hand went up. That was his answer.

As the warriors, male and female, looked on, D and the baron rode away.

"So, the whole town's against them?" Mikado murmured. "He's all

on his own, just like usual."

"But it suits him. That kind of blood-chilling solitude fits the man."

The men nodded in unison at Delilah's words.

In a strangely pensive tone, Galil added, "You said it. But I'd never wanna be like that. I'd rather die first."

There was no reply. Not even nods. There was no need.

"Head back now?" Mikado suggested, turning. And then he stopped.

A few yards away, there stood three figures.

"Looks like it's the competition," Mikado said, grinning.

"What's your business?" someone asked.

Perhaps due to the sheriff being there with them, no one lobbed any bombs into the office, and D and the baron lived to see the next day. The circuit court was set up in a hall on the edge of town.

"I suppose they'll give me a lawyer," the baron mused, unable to think of anything else after returning to the office the night before.

"Don't worry. There are lawyers attached to the court. Seems they can vary wildly in ability, though. If it's representation you need, we've got a lawyer here in town, but he's kind of pricey at a thousand dalas a day. Also, I don't think he'd take a Noble for a client. You in particular would be on the shit list."

"Sheesh . . . Then what am I . . ."

The sheriff brought the edge of his hand down on the back of his neck with a chopping motion, then balled the same hand over his heart.

"Shit, they'll take my head off and put a stake through my heart? Damn it all . . . That's about as certain a death as you can get."

"Well, good luck. A carriage will escort you to the court. I'll be along, too, so relax. Although if pretty boy there is around, I'm not likely to be needed," the sheriff said, seeming to have quite a good grasp of the situation.

The circuit court consisted of a judge, prosecutors, public defenders, a clerk, and one additional person who handled assorted duties. Ordinarily the clerk would receive lawsuits from the area they were visiting and relay them to the judge, then divide the plaintiffs and defendants among the prosecutors and public defenders. When pleading a case to the clerk, all pertinent physical evidence had to be provided, because the time allotted to a case, from the start of the trial to the end of sentencing, was limited to less than an hour. It was safe to say that the trial hinged on this evidence.

This time, the only case on the docket concerned the baron. The plaintiffs were the families of the children abducted five thousand years earlier by the baron or those acting on his behalf, and also the descendants of those families. The evidence consisted of R-disks from more than five thousand years earlier that contained footage and taped testimony by people who had been there.

When the brutal deeds of Lord Begley and other Nobles acting on the baron's behalf were projected in the air, the spectators filling the hall fell silent, and then the sobbing began. Assemblymen, town workers, bankers, saloon owners, casino and hotel operators, the butcher, the baker, students, the sword fighting instructor, the owners of the general store and thrift shop, teachers, housewives—the eyes of all of them were mad with loathing.

As D was leaning back against one wall in the same gallery, his left hand said in a low voice, "Now this is what I call being surrounded by enemies. No matter how much of a fight he puts up, he'll get the death penalty for sure. What are you gonna do?"

"Nothing," D replied.

The baron had promised him that no matter what the outcome of the trial, when he was returned to his cell, he would tell the Hunter the whereabouts of the Sacred Ancestor.

"So, is the defense up next?"

Well out of range of the hoarse voice, the public defender got to his feet and in a much raspier tone stated that more than five thousand years ago the Nobility were far from being emotionally mature, not knowing how to contain their own cruelty, and that in light of the relationship between the Nobility and human beings at the time, there were even some humans that admitted such actions were unavoidable. He explained that, with that in mind, he hoped they would make allowances for those circumstances and show human mercy when sentencing him. Though unenthusiastic, the graying, middle-aged public defender actually turned out to be quite an eloquent lawyer.

Once both sides had finished presenting their cases, the judge turned to the baron and asked if he had anything he'd like to say in conclusion.

"I most certainly do!" the baron responded, rising from the counsel table and beginning a fervent speech.

"Just who do you bastards think I am, anyway? I am the one and only Baron Alpulup Macula, a member of the Greater Nobility known far and wide five thousand years ago. Indeed, at that time I had your ancestors abducted, snatched from their homes. I will admit that. However, my purpose wasn't the simple drinking of blood or shameless fulfillment of sexual desires you've just conjectured. I sought to investigate the immense possibility that lay between mankind and the Nobility. Those who were taken from you never came back. I recognize that. But I never once disregarded their wishes. I told all of them about my grand purpose, then let them decide for themselves whether or not they would sacrifice themselves toward that end. If they said no, I intended to promptly return them to their families. All of them were good enough to agree. The proof of that is the fact that not one of them ever returned. You see, their young brains, their spirits, their very souls understood the thrust of my experiments, so they cooperated. To put it

another way, the very act of holding a trial of this sort denigrates not only myself, but them as well. Don't you see that, you bloody imbeciles?"

Before he'd finished that final tirade, a gunshot rang out, and the baron reeled back, clutching his chest.

III

"This is payback!" one of the people in the gallery shouted, a pistol in hand.

The guards rushed toward him, but another report echoed from elsewhere in the hall, carrying away a quarter of the baron's head. That man, too, shouted about payback.

An arrow whistled through the air, jabbing into the baron's abdomen, and a man with a hatchet leapt forward, only to be headed off by a guard.

"Order in the court! Order!"

The judge pounded his wooden gavel, and the guards stopped what they were doing, but the people were now a mob that left their seats and pressed toward the baron.

Thunder boomed.

The people froze, no longer an unruly mob but spectators in the gallery once more.

"Order in the court!"

Having just discharged both enormous barrels of his shotgun into the ceiling, the judge ordered everyone to sit down again.

"Nice going," the hoarse voice whispered.

As if he'd heard the voice, the judge turned to D and said, "According to the documents the sheriff provided, it seems you're the one who brought the defendant all this way. You even hired on as his guard. Why, then, didn't you do anything just now?"

"Guns don't work on him. He can dodge arrows."

A rumble of voices stirred the murderous air, but even that was absorbed by the voice of darkness.

"Also, because we have you here, Judge."

"Hmm. You're an excellent judge of character, I see," the judge said, nodding. "From the more-than-human look of your face, I take it you're a dhampir. If you weren't, you couldn't escort a Noble here all by yourself. So I have a question for you: What do *you* make of this case?"

D stood up.

People who'd frozen at the first mention of the word "dhampir" now quivered with rapture. They had seen D's face for the first time.

"I have no intention of defending his actions," D said.

"*What?*" the baron exclaimed just as he was pulling the arrow out of his own abdomen, his eyes bulging in their sockets. Ninety percent of

what'd been blown away from his head had already regenerated.

D looked over the spectators.

"The person who shouted about getting payback from the defendant—payback for whom, tell me."

Eyes like a winter's night bored through the first man to attack. The man remained silent.

"And the next?"

Even as the second one stood enraptured, he showed signs of poring over his memories. He quickly shrugged his shoulders.

"Next?"

"Next?"

"Next?"

Not one of them could give him a single name.

"There are those who have a right to hate, and those who don't," D told them stoically. "All you have is anger and spite."

There in the gallery, even the sound of breathing had been stilled.

Presently, the judge announced, "We find the defendant guilty. He's sentenced to one hundred thousand years in the Capital's antimatter prison—however, I grant a stay of five years' time before he begins serving his sentence."

There was surprisingly little booing from the spectator gallery.

"We've got trouble here," the hoarse voice murmured. "If they'd thrown the book at him, that would've been one thing, but letting him off with a light sentence is practically inviting this mob to lynch him instead. Watch for it any minute now."

It was an hour after the trial's ending that the paperwork was finished and they exited the courthouse.

When the baron got into the carriage, the sheriff slapped him on the shoulder and said to him, "I don't know whether you've got the best luck in the world or the worst."

The carriage started off. In addition to D and the baron, it carried the sheriff and two guards. Two more guards were up on the coachman's perch.

Before five seconds had passed, D said, "Town's in the opposite direction."

"What?" the sheriff exclaimed as he got to his feet, and through the window beside him the upside-down face of one of the guards peeked in. "What's going on?" he asked the man.

"It's weird. The horses are doing their own thing—they won't mind us at all."

The sheriff was about to say something when D laid his hand on the lawman's shoulder, stopping him.

"What's up ahead?" the Hunter asked the guard.

"Not a thing," the man replied flatly.

The guard pulled himself back up.

Gazing out the window, the sheriff said, “The horses are under a spell. Should we bail out? The Noble would probably be fine.”

“Let’s just keep going.”

Listening to this exchange, the baron went pale. “What are you *talking* about? I’m gonna make a jump for it!”

“Get out and they’ll still come after you,” D said. “We’ve got to finish this.”

“No way!”

The baron was still ready to leap out, but D pulled him back, forced him to sit, and took a seat right next to him.

After about ten minutes, the carriage came to a halt. They were out in the middle of the wasteland. Yellow earth spread without end in all directions.

Sticking his head out the window, the sheriff asked, “See anything?”

There was no reply.

Going over to the door, D told them, “Stay in here,” then left like a black wind.

He climbed up into the coachmen’s perch. The two guards had breathed their last. There wasn’t a mark on them. He put his left hand to their faces.

“Poison,” the hoarse voice told him. “But there’s no sign they were eating or drinking anything, and I don’t think there’s much chance both of them just died of a drug overdose. Where’d it come from?”

At that point the carriage door opened and the sheriff and guards stepped out. Guns at the ready, they scanned all around them.

“Stop!”

Even before D’s shout, the sheriff had looked in front of the carriage, cried out in surprise, and readied his gun.

It was at that moment that three figures fell to earth about thirty feet away. Before anyone knew it, the trio had fallen from the sky to smash into the ground feet first—only they didn’t. Stopping dead about a foot from the surface, the trio slowly settled on the ground. The sheriff looked up, but there was no sign of any kind of flying machine. The only conceivable answer was that at least one of the three had the ability to fly.

“Freeze,” the sheriff ordered them. The guards had their guns at the ready, too.

“I’m Gerard,” the man in the half coat said by way of introduction. He had a green muffler covering his mouth.

“I’m Puff,” said the man in a commonplace shirt and pants, a rugged-looking machete and its sheath tucked through his belt.

“I’m Vinne,” said the girl, who had a crimson scarf wound about her head. With her supple limbs and lovely countenance, it really seemed a pity she was there in the company of those sandy, bearded men.

“Killing’s our job,” she continued. “Give us the Noble, and no harm will come to you.”

The sheriff wagged his pistol from side to side. “Can’t do that. I’m gonna give you to the count of three to put your hands behind your heads and lie face down on the ground. If not, we’ll shoot you dead. One—”

The three of them looked at each other. Vinne’s lips curled. She’d smiled.

“Two . . .”

Gerard reached for his muffler with his right hand.

“Three!”

The sheriff and the guards concentrated their gunfire on their three opponents.

“They’re gone!”

Staring at the spot where the trio had been, the sheriff and the guards found their field of vision violently rocked when they turned around. Even before they had time to claw at their own throats, there was bright blood spilling from their mouths, and then their convulsing bodies fell at length on the ground.

Someone else writhed as well—the baron.

From behind him, a stark wooden needle was launched toward the sky. D was certain he’d seen the trio about thirty feet in the air. However, they suddenly disappeared, and the needle of unfinished wood shot through empty space and out of sight.

A wind blew down on him from overhead. Caught in it, the baron spat up blood again. There was poison mixed in that wind.

Covering his mouth, D ran. He sensed a presence behind him. Making a backward thrust with his blade, he heard a harsh clang and deflected something. Limning a parabola, the dagger flew off, disappearing somewhere into the wasteland.

The Hunter looked over his shoulder. The trio stood behind him on the ground. One of them moved with unholy speed, one expelled poison, and one used the wind to direct it at people. As he twisted around, D let the needles fly.

The trio vanished, and at the same time male and female screams rang out behind D. Tangled together, the three of them fell. Judging from the way the group was balanced, Vinne was the flier. Stark wooden needles protruded from her chest and abdomen.

Overhead or behind his back, their movements had always been within thirty feet—and D had read the pattern.

Vinne fell. Streams of blood lent their vivid hue to the wasteland.

That left two.

D charged forward, all the while hearing the baron wailing about how he was dying.

Gerard’s lips were pursed. There was a howl as a vortex formed.

Being spun like a top, the Hunter was lifted into the air. Every bone in his body creaked. Ribs broke, and internal organs ruptured. With fresh blood spraying from his mouth and nose, D hurled his needles. Each and every one of them was blown back to pierce the Hunter.

"What's wrong, kid? This is where we'll bury that Noble," Gerard laughed. The Hunter could even make out his Adam's apple. But suddenly, his voice changed. A different wind struck his face. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he saw something. A shadowy form like a black bat was charging straight at him, tearing through his deadly air turbulence in the process. He saw D, the hem of his coat spread like a pair of unholy wings. All he could do was stand there, stock still, as the Hunter's blade sank into his head, splitting it down to the chin.

The third—Puff—let out a scream and started to flee. He'd only run about ten feet before a rough wooden needle penetrated the nape of his neck.

After watching Puff thud to the ground, D slumped forward, spitting blood. The turbulence Gerard had thrown at him had carried Puff's poison. Bracing his longsword against the ground, D drew a succession of ragged breaths.

"This is . . . some serious . . . poison," the hoarse voice said. "It's even got me . . . messed up . . . That Puff character . . . must've studied . . . the Nobility's . . . pharmacology."

A face surfaced in the palm of his left hand. It was contorted with pain.

"But we'll . . . get over it . . . eventually. Just hang in there . . . about an hour. Lie down . . . and rest . . ."

"Afraid not," said the Hunter.

"Wha . . ."

D stood up straight. A streak, thin as a silk thread, shot past his eye. Rain. It instantly became a downpour that left a haze of raindrops bouncing off him.

"Ooooh, that's just rubbing salt in the wound. At times like this, having someone put us out of our misery wouldn't be half bad!"

"Every once in a while, you hit the nail on the head."

"Oh, don't flatter me!" the hoarse voice said, laughing feebly. "Better hurry up and get the whereabouts of the Sacred Ancestor from the baron. I've got a bad feeling about this."

Pulling his blade out of the ground, D turned toward the baron.

Pretentious laughter overlapped with the sound of the rain.

"Bwahahaaa!"

IV

The baron was on his feet. When had he recuperated from the poison?

Not even D could recover from it immediately.

D's gaze was drawn to the leather satchel the Nobleman carried in his right hand. It should've been back in the sheriff's office, where the Hunter had left it.

"You little bastard . . . How on earth did you . . . ?"

In response to the groans of the hoarse voice, the baron chortled once more. "Who would've thought *he* would show himself at this of all times? D, you still don't measure up to him yet. At any rate, I'm free. See you around!"

Gossamer sheets of rain swallowed up the diminutive form. D tried to go after him, but for some reason his legs wouldn't move.

"Ah, yes—his whereabouts. It was quite some time ago, but I heard he was in the castle ruins section of the Capital. I suppose that's better than not knowing anything. Be careful when you go there. I'm off to get myself a bath and the very finest Tokai wine. And I'll thank you to never cross my path again. Bwaahaaahaaahaaaa!"

And then the baron's laughter and all other signs of him abruptly disappeared.

Turning his head slightly to the right, D focused his gaze into the depths of the rain. A number of presences were coming. Before long, they formed a line in front of D.

"You okay, brother?" The inquiry came from Mikado, high on the back of his steed. "We came to check up on you. Me and Delilah won the bet."

"I'm glad," a female voice said, and she meant it from the bottom of her heart.

"Truth is, I was hoping I'd lose," Tong said, as if to make amends.

"You lying sack of shit!" Enba shot back at him good-naturedly.

"State your business," said D.

There was no chance the group being out there was a coincidence. Since mention had been made of checking up on him, they undoubtedly knew about the trio and what they'd planned to do.

"Oh, yeah—the baron must've just disappeared," Mikado said, sounding somewhat displeased. "That was thanks to the power of *a certain great individual*. And we happened to run into that same individual on our way out here just now."

"Oh, really?" the hoarse, rain-soaked voice gasped from the vicinity of D's left hand.

"Sorry, D, but we took the folks in town up on an offer, too. They asked us to get rid of the baron and you," Delilah said in a voice that sounded like she was on the brink of tears.

"But, you know, we want to do this strictly fair and square. No freakin' tricks, we told 'em," Enba added.

"The folks in town went and hired that damned trio, too. We were there first, but the mayor told us to settle the order between us, and we

ended up with the second turn," said Mikado. "Getting back to what I mentioned a moment ago. We were given power by the Great One. Enough power to take you. In return, the Great One got to take the baron with him."

"Then you won't be getting paid," said D.

It was the baron the townsfolk really wanted.

"We considered that, but we decided we'd pass on a little income in favor of power that would stay with us. Now we could slay greater dragons, or even the toughest Nobles."

"So, you're turning on your employers?"

"Don't put it like that," Galil said, sounding mortified.

"Come at me, then," D said in a low tone that froze the rain. Even the sound of the raindrops died out. His ghastly aura had cowed it.

"This might sound self-serving, but we at least want to do this fair and square," Mikado said, and the shadowy figures in the rain nodded.

The hoarse voice said, "Hope you don't regret it."

"We'll meet again."

Mikado turned around.

"Later," said Tong.

"See you," Galil said.

"Farewell," said what must've been Delilah.

"So long, bro."

Enba vanished. The thunder of their hoofbeats took the longest time to fade into the sounds of the rain. All that remained was death and D.

White clouds scampered around the blue sky like kittens. After bringing the bodies of the sheriff and the guards back to the lawman's office, the Hunter left matters in the hands of the judge, who was still there. A doctor was called in, and three days later it was decided that it'd all gone as D said. Word of the baron's disappearance had already spread through the town, and the people seemed to stab at D with their gazes as he left Zappara.

After about thirty minutes, there was a black forest up ahead. The road was sucked right into the trees. Without warning, D gave a kick to his steed's flanks. He galloped on, the wind swirling in his wake.

The sunlight became dappled as it fell through the trees. A shadowy figure dropped from above. Silvery gleams crossed right above D's head. A sharp *ting!* followed the small figure that was swallowed by the treetops to the left.

Swinging like a pendulum from a rope tied to a tree on the opposite side of the road, his opponent had apparently enjoyed some success. With blood still spurting from his right side, D had already galloped another hundred yards. The shadowy figure's weapons had been *tegaki* claws, and the bright blood dripping from the treetops where his opponent had vanished told D something. The lone blow he'd dealt the man had fatally wounded him.

From up ahead, a horse and rider were approaching. More than his height, it was the rider's buckteeth that made an impression. However, crossing the blades of the longswords he held in either hand, he was the very picture of heroism.

D's sword gleamed in his hand. The instant they passed each other, there was a hard *clang!* like a scream from D's blade as it broke in two.

A red trail streaming from him, D galloped off.

Galil's horse stopped. The broken blade was stuck through the right side of its neck and out the left. With his horse halted, the warrior turned and looked back at D.

"That was mighty fine . . . Godspeed to you . . . brother."

And then the second assassin fell from his steed and moved no more.

Blood still poured from the Hunter's right side.

"It's pretty deep—but whatever, I'll have it closed up in no time," his left hand said.

"Leave it."

"What?"

"The next one's coming."

Suddenly, his cyborg horse reared up like a vengeful god. The blob that'd appeared to one side of him had cut across the road just in front of the beast. The way D kept from being thrown without relying on the reins, using just his legs to grip the barrel of his steed and stay on, was a testimony to the power of those legs.

Above him, a sphere about six and a half feet in diameter flew down. From the ground it'd scurried up a nearby bole, then leapt out of the top of that tree. It made a gleaming thrust that D barely dodged, his left shoulder being split open in the process.

Perhaps D was prepared for as much, because he didn't even flinch, striking at the sphere with his broken sword, but the blade sank in only to spring back ineffectually.

Bouncing back onto the road, the sphere made a rubbery *twang!* and turned into Tong with a sword gripped in one hand.

"Did you think I was just a plain ol' fatty, D? Forgive me, but I've gotta do this."

Puffing up, he became the sphere again—and then a red line streaked right into his throat. With ridiculous ease, it poked out again through the top of his head. The same rubbery ball of flesh that'd deflected his blade couldn't stop a stake.

"That's something else," the hoarse voice murmured from the horse's back, sounding a little scared.

"Looks can be deceiving, eh?" D replied as he gazed down at Tong rolling back and forth. For some reason, the fat man was smiling.

"Not him. I'm talking about *you*. I was wondering what you were gonna use for a weapon . . ."

The thing jammed through Tong's throat was covered with both his blood and D's own. The Hunter had stuck his hand into the wound in his side and snapped something off. The stark stake was one of D's ribs.

"Two to go," the hoarse voice said rather wearily, "and here they are now!"

At the far end of the road, two riders waited on their steeds. A lithe figure turned straight toward the Hunter. It was Delilah. D had already experienced her skill with the sword she held in her right hand. As they passed each other, would she attack him from a safe distance? Could D guard against an unseen sword with a ten-foot reach in his present condition? What's more, Delilah had been given power by the Great One. D, on the other hand, had only a broken sword for a weapon.

Each galloped toward the other in a cloud of dust until they were close enough to collide. A second later, Delilah and her steed hit him. A blade flashed out.

D's left arm went flying, taken off at the elbow. The broken blade demonstrated sufficient strength and sharpness as it sank into the woman's pale neck.

Why had she charged him instead of keeping her distance?

With no time to ponder what had been going through the girl's mind, D squared off against his final opponent.

"Without your left arm, it seems you can't rise from the dead," Mikado said. Five yards lay between the two of them. "The Great One told me so. And I didn't order Delilah to do that."

"So, she chose to do it for her father?"

Faint ripples of surprise rolled across Mikado's face.

"You knew about that?"

"She looks like you around the eyes."

Mikado closed his eyes, then immediately opened them again.

Both of them dismounted at the same time.

"I've been powered up, so I can finally face you as an equal. But how could I ever explain to my daughter and our comrades that I faced a man with only one arm?"

D watched as Mikado put his left hand behind his back.

"Use this," he said, throwing a knife down at D's feet before putting his arm behind his back again.

D bent over and picked it up, saying, "I'll take you up on that."

Mikado nodded.

A great calm hung between the two of them. And an invisible will to

kill.

The woods began to sing. Every last bird in them was chirping and squawking. And it wasn't the forest alone—the angry howls of heaven and earth seemed to press in on them from all sides. Little by little it grew louder, rising in a plume to the heavens—and spreading across the sky like a supernova. Each and every bird took to the air at once. A maddening chaos of flapping wings painted the sky, blotting out the sun. It lasted a few seconds, and then the birds flew away, and the sun once again shone down starkly on the road.

Two figures—one had fallen, the other was standing. A slim shape crept over to the latter. Picking it up, the one who remained standing reattached it to his left elbow.

"Yep, they came after you one at a time," said the hoarse voice.

THE END

POSTSCRIPT

It's always been my intent to write the Nobility as villains. Even now that remains unchanged. They're always meant to be run through with D's mystic blade. However, after all these years of writing, at some point I seem to have become attached to the villains, too. I say "I seem" because a Noble who appears in this volume—Baron Macula—is the spitting image of the beloved fairy tale character Humpty Dumpty. As I wrote his physical description, I realized, *I don't think I can kill this one off*. Unless my memory fails me, the baron should be the only Noble in the Vampire Hunter series who's survived. This might be a bad sign. An author can't go getting emotional about the villain.

However, the Nobility/vampires have been intriguing creatures from the very start. In the stony basements of ancient castles towering in forests darkened even at midday there rest gorgeous yet forlorn coffins, and with the failing light of dusk the fiends go into motion like shadows. At their center is the tall master of the castle, dressed in black and sporting strikingly elongated canine teeth. For drinking blood, he is cursed and feared by humanity. Those that he preys upon do not find an end in death, but rise again as creatures like him. As vampires.

But what is it that's so abhorrent about vampires? In light of the ways humans kill other humans, the act of drinking blood seems almost kind and elegant. What's more, the dead rise again and go back to their loved ones. Granted, they're looking for blood, but can't we overlook that?

Try watching Hammer Films' *Dracula A.D. 1972*. In it, Dracula only bites three people. His victims don't become vampires but are murdered instead, though that was probably the work of his disciples. But what of the cruelties Dracula's nemesis Van Helsing inflicts on the count? At the very start he gets the spoke of a carriage wheel driven through his heart, and after his resurrection he's stabbed with an iron knife, dropped two stories onto a stone floor, has his face burned by holy water, and the stake that deals the coup de grâce is part of the spike-lined pit he falls into—and Professor Van Helsing, with cruelty knowing no bounds, even hits the count's back with a shovel to drive the stake in deeper! All the count does for a reprisal is to hit Van Helsing and knock him against the wall. Van Helsing is the dangerous one!

Now, it's not entirely due to this movie, but my attitude toward the Nobility has mellowed, and I can't deny that I may find them more sympathetic. I suppose the pudgy little Baron Macula is the result of that. It's possible I'm headed off in a direction I shouldn't pursue. *As the villains of the piece, make the Nobility even colder and crueler*, the writer

within me commands. I should probably listen to him. Nevertheless, I have one request of you. Please don't forget the lovable Baron Macula.

November 2013
While watching *Alice in Wonderland*
Hideyuki Kikuchi